



NIFEA Consultation on Land as Commons, not Commodity 28-30 August 2024, Limuru

Theological Communique on Land as Commons

Coming from diverse, beautiful yet beleaguered lands in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East, Europe and North America, we – theologians, activists, academics, students, and church workers – met from 28 to 30 August 2024 at St Paul's University in Limuru, Kenya for the **New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) Consultation on “Land as Commons, not Commodity.”** Rooted in a vision of an Economy of Life, NIFEA is an initiative of the World Council of Churches, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council and the Council for World Mission.

Drawing wisdom and strength from our faiths and our connection to the land, we examined the unjust economic and social systems that have separated people from the land and degraded the very land that is the base of all life. We recognise that land has inherent dignity and rights in itself, not just because it has value for humans. Yet, we also understand that creation, including humans, and land have a deeply symbiotic relationship. We further recognise that land does not exist on its own but is interwoven with all the matter of the universe.

In our times, however, land is increasingly being reduced to a commodity. It is being abstracted from the rest of creation to which it is integrally connected. In our present context, land is viewed as private property; ownership and control over it accrue economic, political, cultural and symbolic power.

Therefore, we discussed pathways and strategies for building an understanding of land for the common good rather than for profit. We offer this theological communique and advocacy framework as our collective reflection and commitment to promoting alternative economic visions and policies that recognise land as a commons rather than a commodity.

We discern...

Under the influence of globalised capitalism, land has increasingly been taken away from common ownership and privatised for profit. It has become an abstract asset for speculative investment. In the name of a “green economy” and fuelled by the development of agrofuel crops, carbon off-setting schemes, and demand for rare minerals needed for low-carbon energy generation technologies, land grabbing has intensified and dispossessed communities and even future generations; fomented hunger, violence and human rights violations; and produced “sacrifice zones” of environmental destruction, deepening climate injustice. More and more we find that common lands are being enclosed. In rural areas, commons that were used for grazing and subsistence agriculture are being usurped by large corporations or so called ‘development projects.’ In urban areas there is a shrinking of public spaces as these are being commercialised. Instead of being the space from which life emerges and thrives, land



has become reduced to private property from which financial gain is derived. We recognise the collusion of multinational corporations, local elites and the state in driving this agenda.

The roots of this issue were traced back to colonialism, which aimed to assert ownership and control over land. Colonial powers often used violent means and justified their actions using Christian theology. The land was considered "terra nulla," as 'vacant,' ignoring native and Indigenous populations as well as fauna and flora that lived on the land. Land and its inhabitants were conquered and subjugated and local populations were often displaced, forced to work for the settlers, or annihilated to seize control.

The legacy of colonialism continues to manifest in the present-day appropriation of land from Indigenous and native communities, treating the land as a resource to be exploited rather than as a relative or kin to live with. This view contrasts sharply with the Indigenous belief that humans belong to the land, not vice versa. At an immersion visit, we met a group of Indigenous Ogiek activists who spoke of their struggle to receive their land back, preserve it, and live their lives in relation with the Earth. They asked: *When will our homeland be restored?* They and participants sharing examples of land grabbing and exploitation expressed the cry for justice and challenged churches to break the silence and to stand with the marginalised.

We recognise that the ownership and control of land are deeply tied up with both patriarchy and race. Under patriarchal control and domination, land has been owned and controlled by men even though women are often the ones who are involved in subsistence agricultural practices that feed families and communities. In communities worldwide, women are marginalised when it comes to access and decision-making over the land. Moreover, their knowledge is being simultaneously robbed and undervalued. Similarly, we also find that there is a racial element to land, with dominant and dominating races wresting control of the land from those racialised communities that they oppress. In many instances, land degradation and displacement from the land have been the cause of migration and forced migration.

Amidst the social and ecological dislocations generated by the transformation of land into a commodity, counter-movements for decolonisation, land justice, and social and ecological protection have arisen. Rural, urban poor, and Indigenous movements have been at the forefront of these struggles. We particularly celebrate the stories of resistance and hope that we shared and heard including, among others, the Black Farmer's Food Security Network in the United States, churches' actions for food and climate justice in Sierra Leone, the Land Back Lane and social movements that saw Indigenous Peoples and women mobilise for land and forest rights in Canada and India.

We affirm...

God created the land and called it good. Land is good in itself and in the biblical narrative of creation, it is good even before humans were created. Yet land is also valued for its fecundity and the bountifulness it brings to non-human and human life. Along with the oceans, rivers and lakes, it is the space in which God acts and the place within which a large majority of life finds its ground and being. However, we do not want to romanticise either land or nature as benevolent; we understand that it can also be violent and dangerous for many vulnerable communities, especially in an era of human-induced climate change.



"The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). This challenges the notion of land ownership which conflicts with the biblical idea that humans are merely custodians of the Earth. However, the complexity of this text also needs to be acknowledged. Elevating a divine right over and above human rights has led to the rights of people being trampled upon by those who think of themselves as the elect. We find that this is happening even today in the context of Palestine, where divine right is being invoked to confiscate the land from Palestinians. Moreover, we find that the idea that land belongs to God was historically invoked by the colonial powers to claim land under the guise of carrying out a divine mission. In light of this, participants were reminded of the need to challenge misleading theologies and practices. We further recognise that language and theologies that speak of humans as custodians and stewards fall back on hierarchical notions that elevate humans and human needs and priorities above that of the land and non-human creation. These theologies have not always been helpful and have, at times, even been destructive and detrimental.

The Jubilee and Sabbath laws govern the biblical vision of land; these laws not only prescribed rest for the land but also sought the return of the land from those it was taken from. In the biblical vision, everyone was to have access to land and land was not reserved for those who were powerful. Instead, the land was placed within a covenantal relationship between people and God, and breaking that covenant was a sin against God. The Bible shows how even the kings had no right to take away land from their subjects.

We acknowledge Matthew 5:5 resonating Psalm 37, which says: "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the land". The land is not meant for the powerful; rather, we are reminded time and time again that the lofty will be pulled down and brought low while it is the meek who will be fulfilled. We recognise that the land is meant for the poor and the dispossessed and that they, not the powerful, are the ones who will inherit it.

We understand that the land has its agency (dignity). Indigenous communities teach us that humans and the land are deeply connected. We cannot imagine life without land and vice versa. Land is not something to be owned and exploited for wealth accumulation. Rather, it is a common home for all creation, to be cherished for the sustenance of life. Land plays an important role in regulating the climate, water systems, and other ecological processes essential for life.

We recognise that we can only change this harmful economic system if we listen to the most oppressed. We are called not only to listen to and be guided by the voices of the impoverished and the dispossessed but also to *listen to the land*. Job 12:8 reminds us to speak to the Earth, and it will teach us. We are called not only to treat the Earth with care but also to learn from it.

We commit...

As churches and participants of the NIFEA Consultation on "Land as Commons, not Commodity," we repent from our anthropocentric theologies and ideologies that see land as utilitarian and serving human interests rather than having inherent rights and dignity. In a spirit of humility, we commit to listen to the land.



We confess our complicity in land grabbing. We commit to documenting cases of land grabbing, to being present for communities that have been affected, and to share their stories of resistance.

We commit to building awareness and fostering spiritual reflection on land as commons.

We commit to being prophetic communities of resistance that are able to speak truth to power and call out land injustice.

We commit to work for redistributive, reparative, and restorative justice and particularly action for and solidarity with farmers, women and Indigenous communities that have been denied access to land that is rightfully theirs.

We call...

For concrete action by churches such as converting church-owned lands into common spaces and community gardens for the public good;

For churches to conduct fact finding missions that are done from the perspective of the dispossessed including to seek to publish the churches' own complicity in land grabbing;

For the formation of an ecumenical land rights movement; and

For churches to conduct advocacy for policies that promote the redistribution, reparation and restoration of land in different contexts.