

Conflict-avoidance, Human Rights and Environmental Democracy in Africa: Curbing Green-Grabbing for Peace and Sustainability

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Conflict-avoidance, Human Rights and Environmental Democracy in Africa?: Curbing Green-Grabbing for Peace and Sustainability

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Abstract

This paper discusses how green-grabbing can be curbed in Africa for peace and sustainability. The paper observes that green-grabbing is widespread in Africa. It examines how green-grabbing manifests itself in the continent. The paper posits that green-grabbing is a negative and undesirable phenomenon in Africa since it fuels land injustices against indigenous peoples and local communities, leads to conflicts, violates human rights and threatens local livelihoods and knowledge systems. Due to its negative impacts, the paper argues that tackling green-grabbing in Africa is a key agenda towards ensuring peace and sustainability. The paper examines how green-grabbing can be curbed in Africa including through fostering conflict-avoidance, upholding human rights and promoting environmental democracy.

1.0 Introduction

Green-grabbing is a negative phenomenon that undermines peace and sustainability. Green-grabbing occurs when land and other natural resources are appropriated in the name of environmental goals usually to the detriment of vulnerable groups including indigenous peoples and local communities¹. Green-grabbing has also been defined as the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends². The term green-grabbing can also be used to describe large scale private appropriation of land and other resources such as water legitimized on the grounds of environmental protection³.

It has been observed that in green-grabbing, environmental agendas are the core drivers and goals of land grabs⁴. Consequently, green-grabbing is usually linked to environmental agendas such as biodiversity conservation, carbon sequestration, ecosystem restoration, ecotourism, and carbon offset projects among others⁵. Green-grabbing has been identified as a new form of appropriation that follows traditional forms of land grabbing especially in the Global South⁶. Under green-grabbing, land dispossession, displacement and marginalisation are perpetuated, but these actions are often painted 'green' and presented as if they

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¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations., 'Green grabbing: A threat to global biodiversity' Available at <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1714972/> (Accessed on 05/06/2026)

² Fairhead, J., Leach, M., & Scoones, I., 'Green Grabbing: a new appropriation of nature?' Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03066150.2012.671770#d1e247> (Accessed on 05/06/2026)

³ Green Grabbing., Available at <https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/einrichtungen/cias/publikationen/wiki/g/green-grabbing.xml> (Accessed on 05/06/2026)

⁴ Leach, M., 'Green Grabbing' Available at <https://www.greeneconomycoalition.org/news-and-resources/green-grabbing-dark-side-green-economy> (Accessed on 05/06/2026)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Adaman, F et al., 'Green-Grabbing: A New Form of Appropriation' Available at <https://tr.boell.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/green-grab-en-final.pdf> (Accessed on 05/06/2026)

are necessary to save the planet⁷. Green-grabbing usually involves wholesale alienation of land, and in some instances, it involves the restructuring of rules and authority in the access, use and management of land and natural resources with profound effects on vulnerable populations⁸.

Green-grabbing is undesirable since it often displaces vulnerable groups including indigenous peoples and local communities, threatens livelihoods, undermines food security, and erodes indigenous and local knowledge systems and practices⁹. It has been observed that green-grabbing builds on well-known histories of colonial and neo-colonial resource alienation fuelling injustices, conflicts and human right violations¹⁰. Curbing green-grabbing is therefore vital towards ensuring peace and sustainability.

This paper discusses how green-grabbing can be curbed in Africa for peace and sustainability. The paper observes that green-grabbing is widespread in Africa. It examines how green-grabbing manifests itself in the continent. The paper posits that green-grabbing is a negative and undesirable phenomenon in Africa since it fuels land injustices against indigenous peoples and local communities, leads to conflicts, violates human rights and threatens local livelihoods and knowledge systems. Due to its negative impacts, the paper argues that tackling green-grabbing in Africa is a key agenda towards ensuring peace and sustainability. The paper examines how green-grabbing can be curbed in Africa including through fostering conflict-avoidance, upholding human rights and promoting environmental democracy.

2.0 Green Grabbing in Africa: Causes and Effects

Green-grabbing is a common and widespread phenomena in Africa. Green-grabbing has been identified as a rising threat in Africa where large scale land acquisitions are being undertaken under the disguise of environmental projects¹¹. It is estimated that nearly 20 percent of land deals in Africa are green grabs often targeting lands belonging to indigenous peoples and local communities¹². It has been observed that green-grabbing brings new powerful actors into Africa's delicate land dynamics – creating a dangerous interface involving indigenous and local communities, small-scale farmers, governments, multinational corporations, large conservation groups, and real estate developers¹³.

It has been observed that Africa and the Global South is particularly vulnerable to green-grabbing. This phenomenon is usually perpetuated under the pretext of environmental projects including carbon offsetting, biodiversity conservation and green projects such as renewable energy developments¹⁴. For example, it has been observed that investments in carbon offsetting projects pose a threat to the land

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Fairhead, J., Leach, M., & Scoones, I., 'Green Grabbing: a new appropriation of nature?' Op Cit

⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations., 'Green grabbing: A threat to global biodiversity' Op Cit

¹⁰ Fairhead, J., Leach, M., & Scoones, I., 'Green Grabbing: a new appropriation of nature?' Op Cit

¹¹ Green grabs: How carbon markets are grabbing Africa's land., Available at <https://ipes-food.org/video-and-media/how-carbon-markets-are-grabbing-africas-land-susan-chomba/> (Accessed on 08/06/2026)

¹² Chomba, S., & Belay, M., 'Land Squeeze: The hidden battle for Africa's soils' Available at <https://africanarguments.org/2024/06/land-squeeze-green-grabs-hidden-battle-for-africas-soils/> (Accessed on 08/06/2026)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Green grabs: How carbon markets are grabbing Africa's land., Op Cit

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rights of indigenous peoples and local communities both globally and in Africa¹⁵. In particular, it has been pointed out that indigenous peoples and local communities are usually evicted from their ancestral lands to pave way for carbon offset projects¹⁶. This often leads to violation of national land laws which give indigenous and local communities ownership rights to their customary lands¹⁷. Carbon offsetting has been identified as a major source of green-grabbing in Africa and the Global South where governments and powerful multinational corporations appropriate vast tracts of land for dubious tree planting, carbon sequestration, and biofuel and green hydrogen schemes¹⁸.

Green-grabbing in Africa is also perpetrated under the disguise of biodiversity conservation. For instance, it has been observed that green grabs occur when land is reallocated for biodiversity reserves¹⁹. It has been pointed out that all over the world, there have been instances of land dispossession, widespread displacement and marginalisation as seen in the creation of national parks, and wildlife and biodiversity reserves framed as necessary for global biodiversity conservation²⁰. This phenomenon is widespread in Africa and the Global South where land is usually appropriated under claims linked to biodiversity protection, ecosystem restoration, and land preservation, often implemented through the designation of biodiversity protected areas or conservation corridors²¹.

The transition to clean energy has also become a source of green-grabbing in Africa and the Global South. For example, it has been observed that renewable energy developments are becoming more popular in Africa due to the continent's enormous clean energy potential and the need to address energy-related issues, electrify remote areas, confront climate change and pollution, and improve energy security²². The United Nations observes that renewable energy investments are beginning to bear fruit in several African countries with wind and solar power dominating non-hydro renewable energy generation and installed capacity²³. However, despite their vital role in energy transition, poorly implemented renewable energy developments are fuelling several environmental and social challenges in Africa. In particular, it has been observed that the acquisition and use of land for renewable energy production, especially in Africa, without addressing historical land-based community grievances contributes to the vulnerability of local communities leading to conflicts and disputes²⁴. The fast expansion of large scale infrastructure of

¹⁵ International Institute for Sustainable Development., 'Carbon Offset Deals and the Risks of "Green Grabbing" Available at https://www.iisd.org/articles/insight/carbon-offset-deals-risks-green-grabbing?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22208053183&gbraid=0AAAAADQ3eTCTRmr4_tjB0jt4mkxxpAkU&gclid=Cj0KCCQjw0JnRBhDJARIsALobnXakU4Fs7i3MOLgC6qtexz3WLIPIdfwrnfo4aMVC9elnoMfcpg_7Y6Z8aAhxfEALw_wcB (Accessed on 08/06/2026)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Chomba. S., & Belay. M., 'Land Squeeze: The hidden battle for Africa's soils' Op Cit

¹⁹ Green Grabbing: A growing threat to biodiversity and communities., Available at <https://ipes-food.org/green-grabbing-a-growing-threat-to-biodiversity-and-communities/> (Accessed on 08/06/2026)

²⁰ Adaman. F et al., 'Green-Grabbing: A New Form of Appropriation' Op Cit

²¹ Esteve-Jorda. C., & Scheidel. A., 'Green grabbing implications for human rights, equity and the ecological transition' Available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11625-026-01830-y> (Accessed on 08/06/2026)

²² Alex-Oke. T et al., 'Renewable energy market in Africa: Opportunities, progress, challenges, and future prospects' *Energy Strategy Reviews.*, Volume 59, 2025

²³ United Nations., 'Advancing SDG 7 in Africa.' Available at <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/2023%20Advancing%20SDG7%20in%20the%20Africa-062923.pdf> (Accessed on 08/06/2026)

²⁴ The Danish Institute For Human Rights., 'Scoping Paper: Human Rights and The Energy Transition in Kenya' Available at

renewable energy installations including wind, geothermal and hydro projects fuels green legitimization and grabbing leading to large scale acquisition of land often at the expense of vulnerable groups especially indigenous peoples and local communities²⁵.

The prevalence of green-grabbing in Africa and the Global South is a major threat to human rights. For instance, it has been observed that green-grabbing is accelerating and worsening rural poverty, inequality, and food insecurity in Africa²⁶. In particular, green-grabbing results in direct loss of land and access to natural resources with communities that depend land for farming, grazing, and gathering being disproportionately impacted leading to food insecurity, poverty and loss of livelihoods²⁷. In addition, green-grabbing poses threats to pastoralism since grazing corridors and dry-season reserves used by pastoralists are being fenced off by vast carbon projects which target remote rangelands²⁸. Green-grabbing has also been identified as a new frontier of land inequalities and injustices in Africa and the Global South²⁹. For example, by prioritizing large-scale land acquisitions that neglect and violate customary land tenure systems, the very foundation of local livelihoods especially in Africa and the Global South, green-grabbing is exacerbating land concentration and social inequality³⁰. Green-grabbing has also become a major cause of environmental and natural resource conflicts with communities often protesting against unfair and unjust land acquisition in their territories³¹.

In light of the foregoing concerns, curbing green-grabbing in Africa and the Global South is necessary and vital towards peace and sustainability.

3.0 Curbing Green-Grabbing for Peace and Sustainability

Green-grabbing is a negative phenomenon that undermines peace and sustainability. In particular, the prevalence of green-grabbing in Africa leads to injustices and human right violations including loss of land and livelihoods, food insecurity, poverty and conflicts³². Green-grabbing in Africa is driven by large-scale land acquisitions under the disguise of environmental projects including carbon offsetting, renewable energy production, biodiversity conservation with adverse impacts on customary and local tenure systems³³.

Curbing green-grabbing in Africa is therefore necessary towards peace and sustainability. In particular, by tackling green-grabbing, it is possible to avoid land and natural resource-based conflicts, protect local

https://www.humanrights.dk/files/media/document/Kenya%20Energy%20Transition%20and%20Human%20Rights%20Scoping_accessible.pdf (Accessed on 08/06/2026)

²⁵ Green Grabbing., Op Cit

²⁶ Green grabs: How carbon markets are grabbing Africa's land., Op Cit

²⁷ Large-Scale Land Acquisitions for Carbon Offsetting: Green Grabbing or Just Transition?., Available at <https://www.reconcile-ea.org/large-scale-land-acquisitions-for-carbon-offsetting-green-grabbing-or-just-transition/> (Accessed on 09/06/2026)

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Green grabs: How carbon markets are grabbing Africa's land., Op Cit

³² Large-Scale Land Acquisitions for Carbon Offsetting: Green Grabbing or Just Transition?., Op Cit

³³ Raycraft. J et al., 'Land grabbing in pastoral areas: insights from Eastern Africa' Available at <https://www.frontierspartnerships.org/journals/pastoralism-research-policy-and-practice/articles/10.3389/past.2025.15266/pdf> (Accessed on 09/06/2026)

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livelihoods, ensure food security and promote human rights towards peace and sustainability³⁴. In order to achieve this agenda, it is imperative to strengthen customary land rights³⁵. It has been observed that legal recognition of customary land ownership and pastoralists' mobility rights is key towards preventing large-scale land acquisitions that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups including indigenous peoples, local communities and pastoralists³⁶.

In addition, it is necessary for environmental projects to take into account the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of affected communities in order to promote environmental democracy³⁷. The idea of environmental democracy envisages that environmental and natural resource decisions must involve all citizens and should adequately and equitably address the needs and interests of all stakeholders³⁸. According to environmental democracy, meaningful participation by the public is critical to ensuring that decisions related to the environment and natural resources adequately and equitably address the interests of all citizens towards sound environmental governance and Sustainable Development³⁹. Fostering environmental democracy is key towards curbing green-grabbing by ensuring that local communities have a meaningful say in decisions that impact their land, livelihood and well-being⁴⁰. Consequently, it has been suggested that environmental projects including carbon projects and renewable energy developments should be democratized by ensuring that decision-making processes include representatives from local communities for justice, equity and fairness⁴¹. In particular, it has been observed that by recognizing the right of indigenous peoples and local communities to be treated as the owners and managers of their customary territory, FPIC guarantees them a decisive voice at every stage of development planning and implementation for projects that affect them⁴². Fostering FPIC is key towards achieving environmental democracy in environmental projects such as renewable energy developments and carbon projects including through access to information and public participation for affected communities⁴³. It is therefore necessary to uphold FPIC in order to promote environmental democracy and curb green-grabbing.

In addition, it has been observed that prioritising community-led environmental projects can prevent green-grabbing⁴⁴. For example, supporting environmental projects including carbon projects and biodiversity conservation projects developed by and with indigenous peoples and local communities can ensure that they retain ownership and benefits from such initiatives, rather than being displaced from their territories by large-scale acquisitions⁴⁵. In addition, there is need to prevent forced acquisition of land for

³⁴ Large-Scale Land Acquisitions for Carbon Offsetting: Green Grabbing or Just Transition?., Op Cit

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Adaman. F et al., 'Green-Grabbing: A New Form of Appropriation' Op Cit

³⁸ Center for International Environmental Law., 'Environmental Democracy and Access Rights' Available at <https://www.ciel.org/issue/environmental-democracy-access-rights/> (Accessed on 09/06/2026)

³⁹ Worker. J., & Ratte. S., 'What Does Environmental Democracy Look Like?' Available at <https://www.wri.org/insights/what-does-environmental-democracy-look> (Accessed on 06/09/2026)

⁴⁰ Adaman. F et al., 'Green-Grabbing: A New Form of Appropriation' Op Cit

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Free, Prior, and Informed Consent in REDD+., Available at https://redd.unfccc.int/uploads/2_74_redd_20130710_recoftc_free_2C_prior_2C_and_informed_consent_in_red_dplus.pdf (Accessed on 09/06/2026)

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Large-Scale Land Acquisitions for Carbon Offsetting: Green Grabbing or Just Transition?., Op Cit

⁴⁵ Ibid

environmental projects unless accompanied by fair, prompt and adequate compensation and alternative livelihood provisions⁴⁶. Ensuring transparency and accountability by making land contracts and benefit-sharing agreements public can also enable communities can hold developers accountable towards curbing green-grabbing⁴⁷.

4.0 Conclusion

Green-grabbing is an unwanted practice that severely impacts human rights in Africa and the Global South. By appropriating large tracts of land, legitimized on the grounds of environmental protection, green grabbing fuels land injustices and inequalities, impacts local livelihoods, leads to rural poverty and food insecurity, and causes resource-based conflicts⁴⁸. Curbing green-grabbing is therefore necessary towards peace and sustainability. It is imperative to actualise this agenda by strengthening customary land rights, promoting environmental democracy by upholding FPIC, prioritising community-led environmental projects, ensuring fair, prompt and adequate compensation in cases of land acquisition and ensuring transparency and accountability in land contracts and benefit-sharing arrangements⁴⁹. Curbing green-grabbing in Africa is therefore an achievable agenda towards conflict-avoidance, human rights and environmental democracy for peace and sustainability.

⁴⁶ Adaman. F et al., 'Green-Grabbing: A New Form of Appropriation' Op Cit

⁴⁷ Large-Scale Land Acquisitions for Carbon Offsetting: Green Grabbing or Just Transition?., Op Cit

⁴⁸ Adaman. F et al., 'Green-Grabbing: A New Form of Appropriation' Op Cit

⁴⁹ Large-Scale Land Acquisitions for Carbon Offsetting: Green Grabbing or Just Transition?., Op Cit

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