

What crop theft in northern Uganda tells us about relations between investors and communities

In the Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda, commercial farmers are experiencing an increasing theft of maize. Arthur Owor and Carolin Dieterle explore the underlying reasons for this and draw attention to the need for more meaningful collaboration between investors and host communities.

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In the Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda, commercial agriculture is on the rise. After a gruelling 20-year war against the Lord's Resistance Army, the region is experiencing renewed economic growth and an influx of private investment ventures in commercial agriculture. Taking advantage of the region's favourable soils and climate, foreign and domestic companies are setting up large-scale maize, rice and sugarcane plantations.

Many see the expansion of commercial agriculture as an opportunity to help lift the region out of poverty by providing much needed employment opportunities, boosting local and regional markets, expanding infrastructure, and delivering technological know-how – a clear 'win-win' for both the investors and the host communities. However, increasing instances of crop theft on commercial farms reveal that 'win-win' scenarios are not an automatic outcome. Visiting a range of commercial agriculture projects across the Acholi sub-region, we learned that systematic maize theft is frustrating many investors. In one case, a police raid near a maize farm in Nwoya District recovered over 13 tons of maize from a nearby village.



Maize fields in Nwoya District. Photo credit: Carolin Dieterle

It seems that maize is being stolen for personal consumption as well as for selling it in local markets. A farm manager explained that the growing market for maize in Uganda has incentivised communities to steal maize from the large-scale farms and then sell it in local markets.

In response, investors have massively increased surveillance on their farms, including the installation of cameras and drones to oversee plantations. Despite these measures, maize theft remains difficult to control as people can hide in tall crops during the day in order to steal maize at night. If caught stealing crops, legal sanctions and penalties are usually the consequence. People can be imprisoned, forced to pay fines and sometimes forced to appear in the courts of law.

The problem has even pushed some investors to diversify their crop production. A commercial farm in Amuru District has recently switched from maize to mostly rice – partly due to ongoing theft of maize by communities.

After several years of ongoing maize theft, increased surveillance measures, and strict punishments, relations between investors and communities have soured in some cases. In 2016, a woman was run over and killed by a tractor while taking maize from a commercial farm, further deepening tensions.



Maize fields in Nwoya District. Photo credit: Carolin Dieterle

But is it really the theft of crops that is driving a wedge between communities and investors? The rise in crop theft might also be indicative of a more general flaw in conceptions of what makes a 'win-win' situation. Many investors began their farming ventures by liaising intensely with local communities, setting up contract farming schemes, and making promises of social welfare. With time and mounting financial pressure, however, many have backed away from these plans, causing community disillusionment. In a bid to win support from local communities, some investors initially allowed them to collect the remains of maize cobs after their combine harvester tractors passed through the fields. This had a lasting impact, conditioning local communities to gather free maize grains and perhaps creating a culture of dependency on the farming projects. When farm managers later forbade this activity, local communities continued taking maize unauthorised.

How can investors achieve community buy-in without creating misunderstandings and dependencies on their project? It matters whether communities feel respected and taken as serious counterparts in large-scale farming projects. People tend to not undermine something in which they have a stake and to which they are committed. The continuing theft of maize might indicate that there is little sense of 'pulling together' when it comes to these projects. The way that investors have responded to crop theft, as shown above, is also indicative of a disconnect between communities and investors. Instead of drone surveillance, punishment, or switching production to crops that are easier to survey, perhaps more effort should be taken to assess communities' needs and find better ways to integrate people into projects.

It needs to be considered as well that these farming ventures are taking place in a complex setting of land insecurity, poverty, and social inequality. Most commercial farms use cutting-edge modern technology and farming equipment worth millions of dollars. Directly surrounding their farms, villagers use ox ploughs and hand tools on their household plots. The divide between rich and poor is blatant. Moreover, the sensitive context of recent post-conflict recovery, mass internal population displacement, and the influx of over 1.4 million South Sudanese refugees provides a setting of complex land ownership structures and competition over natural resources. Given these circumstances, it is more important than ever to ensure that investments are actively building meaningful relations with local communities from the start. If a sense of ownership and community participation is ensured, then more genuine 'win-win' situations could be the result.

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