

## **Conversation with the Open Society Foundations (OSF) on January 29, 2013**

### **Participants:**

- Richard Mugisha — Program Officer/Country Manager, Uganda, Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa
- Cari Tuna — Co-Founder, Good Ventures
- Holden Karnofsky — Co-Executive Director, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Richard Mugisha.

### **Summary**

Good Ventures and GiveWell spoke with Richard Mugisha of the Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa — part of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) — in order to learn about land grabbing in Uganda, OSF's plans to work against land grabbing in Uganda, and the possibility of co-funding OSF's efforts.

### **Land grabbing in Uganda**

Powerful Ugandan government officials are seizing land from Ugandan citizens without providing them with fair compensation for the land. The government officials' motivation for doing this is that there are private companies that want to use the land, and which compensate government officials to secure land for them. This practice is known as *land grabbing*.

Land grabbing is technically legal because the land is held under customary tenure is not titled and liable to compulsory acquisition by government. This legal provision is often abused by powerful officials who grab the land for different reasons. The people who are living on the land have been living there for a very long time, and in some cases their families have lived on the land for hundreds of years.

Hundreds of thousands of Ugandans have been evicted from their land so far because of land grabbing.

### **OSF's work to prevent land grabbing in Uganda**

OSF is planning on working on preventing land grabbing starting in 2014. OSF expects to collaborate with NGOs like ActionAid Uganda as well as small local

organizations. There are hundreds of local organizations that are interested in working against land grabbing, and OSF is planning on organizing a meeting between them to set up a plan of action.

The activities that OSF plans to fund will be intended to:

1. Recruit lawyers to pursue legal action against land grabbing.
2. Raise broad awareness of land grabbing in order to place political pressure on the officials and companies that would engage in land grabbing so that they don't do so.

This would involve communicating with media sources such as newspapers, television stations and radio programs to make them aware of the issues, in hopes that the media will publicize them.

3. Increase political pressure on the Ugandan government by making the issue of land grabbing an issue that people consider when they vote. (There will be a presidential election in Uganda in 2016.)

This would involve meeting with community leaders such as elders in religious communities with a view toward making the issue of land grabbing a factor that people consider when they vote for presidential candidates.

4. Under the on-going Food Security and Climate Change proposal development, OSF will lay emphasis on the protection of customary land tenure as a way of ensuring the land users' food security and including them, as knowledgeable partners, in climate change adaptation processes.

### **The historical record of land grabbing prevention efforts**

Philanthropic efforts to prevent land grabbing are relatively new. Oxfam was relatively successful in Uganda (more below), but there are not many other historical successes. OSF is willing to take the risk of funding an untested intervention.

### **Co-funding OSF's land grabbing prevention efforts in Uganda**

If OSF and Good Ventures were to provide \$600,000 over two years (\$300,000 each), then OSF and its grantees could do a lot of work in Northern

Uganda to prevent land grabbing. About 10 million people populate the region, so there is potential to protect many people.

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### **Companies that engage in land grabbing**

One of the companies engaging in land grabbing in Uganda is a company called *New Forests Company*, which wishes to grow trees on the land.

There are also powerful individuals in business and government, who may be fronts for international companies, who have participated in land grabbing in oil rich locations where oil is going to be drilled. Land grabbing has also taken place near and around the land proposed for the installment of hydroelectric plants. A few years ago, the President of Uganda was planning to give land to a company that grows sugar.

Some of the countries of origin of corporations that engage in land grabbing in East Africa are Israel, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, South Africa and the UK.

### **Oxfam asked to apologize**

Oxfam reported on the fact that many Ugandans had been evicted so that the UK organization New Forests Company could plant forests. Some of the senior land officials who had been involved with the deals with New Forest Company tried to get Oxfam to apologize for this in the newspapers.

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