Social Justice, Corporate Influence, and Development: Defending the Public Interest at a State University

Angie Carter, Betty L. Wells, Ahna Kruzic

We chronicle student-led resistance to a controversial public-private partnership between the Iowa State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and AgriSol Energy, a transnational energy company engaged in a development project in Tanzania. We track students’ resistance efforts from their genesis in a classroom case study assignment to their broader reach in a community forum organized in collaboration with the local Occupy movement to challenge corporate influence and institutional direction at the university. These efforts elevated ethical concerns about social justice in development projects and, closer to home, defended the mandate of a public university to serve the public good. We emphasize the importance of witnessing, persistence, framing, and alliances in these efforts, mindful of the need to both document and contextualize resistance.


1 Angie Carter, Ph.D. Sociology and Sustainable Agriculture, Assistant Professor of Environmental and Energy Justice, Department of Social Sciences at Michigan Technological University. Address correspondence to: Angie Carter, Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI, 49931; e-mail: ancarter@mtu.edu.

Betty L. Wells, Ph.D. Rural Sociology, Professor of Sociology and Sustainable Agriculture, Department of Sociology at Iowa State University, 103 East Hall, 510 Farmhouse Lane, Ames, Iowa, 50011; e-mail: bwells@iastate.edu.

Ahna Kruzic, MS Rural Sociology and Sustainable Agriculture, Director of Publications and Communications at Food First / Institute for Food and Development Policy, 398 60th Street, Oakland, CA 94618, USA; e-mail: akruzic@foodfirst.org.

Acknowledgements: We thank the students in the Sustainable Agricultural Graduate Program at Iowa State University, members of Occupy ISU/Ames, and the speakers at the 2012 public forum for their work bringing concerns about the AgriSol project to light. Additionally, we thank Jessica Soulis for her comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.