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PAGE 2

The Violence of Development: the Agricultural Agenda as a Vector in Land Conflicts

By Joanny Bélair

PAGE 6

Analytical Brief: Africa at Risk? The Global Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

PAGE 8

News and announcements

The Violence of Development: the Agricultural Agenda as a Vector in Land Conflicts

By Joanny Bélair



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a symbol of the increased financialization of land and agriculture, the phenomenon of land grabs is having lasting consequences on farming communities in developing countries.

The dominant discourse of the World Bank, donors, investors and African governments is part of a narrow vision of modernization. It is predicated on the idea that African farmers are not productive, and that the Western model of productivist agriculture constitutes the panacea.

This agenda, which puts forward productivist commercial agriculture, goes hand in hand with a second international development agenda associated with the formalization of land tenure.

The growing global financial interest in African land seems to lead almost systematically to the transfer of the most sought-after arable lands into the hands of the state, or domestic and foreign investors.

The premise that these investors are more productive is unconvincing, and few actions are carried out to ensure sustainable use of resources.

Job creation appears to be a short-term effect, but produces limited economic spillovers.

The implementation of these agendas ignores the fact that the processes of land allocation and acquisition are inherently political, and generate consequences that are potentially disastrous for vulnerable populations in the event of their political capture.

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Since the financial, food and energy crisis of 2008, the phenomenon of "land grabs" has gained sustained attention. Emblematic of the increased financialization of land and agriculture, the phenomenon is having lasting consequences on farming communities in developing countries. One of its most striking consequences is the quasi-systematic dispossession of land rights of affected peasant populations, leading to increased competition over land resources, social mobilization and an explosion of local land conflicts.

Indeed, empirical analyses of cases of land grabbing show that they frequently give rise to conflict dynamics at the local level (interpersonal, intra-community, between investors and communities, or between states and communities), with varying degrees of violence. There are many explanations, some on issues of historical or capitalist dispossession, and others that focus on ethnic or socio-economic identities. The multidimensional and complex relationship between land governance and these conflicts is, however, difficult to qualify and quantify. Most analyses of land contestations and competitions are case studies rooted in a local reading of the underlying political dynamics. However, as Wondimu and Gebresenbet¹ note, the emergence of these conflicts and the rise in local violence they generate can only be understood through a consideration of the structuring effects of several macro processes on local contexts. Following the same argument, I argue that infrastructural violence at the macro level is a constitutive dimension of land tenure governance and agricultural development initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa, which induces, reproduces and consolidates exclusionary processes that exacerbate local conflict dynamics.² The aim is to draw attention to the indirect but crucial role played by international institutions and donors which,

through the promotion and financing of development agendas, depoliticize these issues and legitimize the consolidation of this infrastructural violence against farmers in developing countries.

Development and agriculture: reductive discourses

The dominant discourse of the World Bank, donors, investors and African governments is rather simplistic. In sub-Saharan Africa, the poorest people live mostly in rural areas and practice subsistence agriculture. Agricultural development is therefore portrayed as the sector with the highest potential for economic growth and poverty reduction and has thus become a priority in national socio-economic development plans. The rationale is that investors, with their commercial agriculture initiatives, will promote agricultural productivity by bridging the yield gap between current and potential production on land identified as *marginal*³ and/or underused. In addition, investors will contribute to poverty alleviation and stimulate socio-economic development through technology transfer and job creation. Behind this reading of the situation is the persistent and historically entrenched assumption, rooted in a narrow vision of modernization, that African farmers are not productive and that the Western model of productivist agriculture is the panacea. This agenda, which puts forward productivist commercial agriculture, goes hand in hand with a second international development agenda associated with the formalization of land tenure. Its ideology is strongly influenced by the Peruvian economist de Soto,⁴ who advocates that untitled land is

"dead capital" and that land formalization is a prerequisite for encouraging investment in agriculture and increasing productivity. Moreover, he argues, it is the only way to reduce poverty for small farmers, as it allows them to use their land titles to access bank loans and thus invest in improving their productivity. However, the empirical evidence available on recent investment projects seriously challenges the claims of this dual development agenda.

Poor results leading to infrastructural violence

Firstly, the growing global financial interest in African land seems to lead almost systematically to the transfer of the *most sought-after arable land* into the hands of the state, domestic or foreign investors. Indeed, investors mainly target the most fertile land located close to irrigation sources and infrastructure, thus finding themselves in direct competition with local populations, which leads to land conflicts. This empirical observation contradicts the prevailing discourse that the lands targeted by such projects are marginal, underused or uninhabited. In the words of Maki⁵, the very idea of the existence of *terra nullius* areas is a persistent myth.

Second, the premise that these investors are more productive is unconvincing. Indeed, beyond the acquisition process, the impacts of these investments remain increasingly uncertain: their failure rate is considerable. As many researchers have observed, significant gaps remain between announced plans and their implementation. Only 22 % of the projects are reported to

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have started production activities, and 30 % are still at the exploratory stage.⁶ More recently, in 2018, a report published by GRAIN⁷ reported that 135 agricultural projects failed between 2007 and 2017, representing 17.5 million hectares transferred that had no tangible impact on local socio-economic development. Moreover, among the projects that have been at least partially successful, recent studies show that investors have low productivity, and that there is no significant difference between small and large producers, although the technology and inputs used by the latter are much higher⁸. As Tufa et. al.⁹ report in their study of the local impacts of investment in Ethiopia, local populations are often the first witnesses of the contradictions associated with this discourse on development and private investment: "The inability of the investor to even grow maize has been a shock to local communities. What they observed on the ground was a complete reversal of what they had been told about the technological and innovative capacity of investors." This is without considering the environmental costs induced by such projects, which are neither qualified nor quantified as externalities. In Tanzania, the British investor *Kilombero plantations* is a clear case in point. Not only has the company knowingly relocated local people to flood-prone areas, creating an explosion of land conflicts, it has also refused to acknowledge that its agrochemical application procedures raise significant environmental concerns in this high ecological value area¹⁰. In Ethiopia, Persson's¹¹ analysis of six large-scale investment projects shows that although four out of six investors conducted environmental impact assessments, none

of them took action to ensure sustainable use of resources, and only two of them incorporated *minimal* measures to mitigate the negative consequences of the projects.

Third, job creation appears to be a short-term effect with limited economic spillovers, since the jobs created are often low-skilled, seasonal, and temporary. For example, in Tanzania, the findings of my study¹² on the local impacts of *Kagera Sugar* are at odds with the official discourse that defines the company as a model investor. My observations reveal that there are very few managerial or professional positions available and that local communities have access only to low-paying jobs such as cane cutting or sowing. The low-wage workers live in work camps that resemble small shantytowns, isolated in the middle of the company's plantation. Working conditions are harsh. Locally, people know when someone starts working for the company because new employees tend to "slim down fast." Moreover, the idea that commercial agriculture creates more jobs has been challenged in a 2012 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which points out that smallholder agriculture usually generates more jobs than large-scale agriculture. Not only do these investments not lead to the promised socio-economic development results, they can also worsen local conditions. According to Shete and Rutten¹³, Karuturi's arrival in Ethiopia led to a 15 to 25 per cent loss of gross annual income for displaced people and about 26 to 30 per cent of affected households became food insecure after the transfer of land to the company. The company did not fulfil any of its initial promises in terms of employment,

production or socio-economic development and eventually abandoned the project in 2012. Moreover, evidence now shows that even so-called inclusive investments, such as contract farming, induce and reproduce dynamics of social differentiation, which often lead to the exclusion of the poorest in favour of the better-off farmers and/or local elites.

Fourth, the implementation of these agendas ignores the fact that the processes of land allocation and acquisition are inherently political, follow historical trajectories of state-building, and the assertion of political control and legitimacy. New land investments contribute to the strengthening of the political and territorial authority of host states. Unsurprisingly, therefore, land formalization programmes often lead to dispossession dynamics, which generate or aggravate land conflicts, especially when they are implemented in parallel with processes aimed at making land "an investment resource."¹⁴ In Tanzania, for example, our comparative study¹⁵ demonstrates this interweaving of formalization and investment agendas: in the thirteen case studies, formalization led to the systematic dispossession of village land to new investors. In Ethiopia, the areas targeted by the national villagization program are often the same as those demarcated as available to investors.¹⁶ This is partly due to the fact that state employees responsible for implementing land mapping and titling also act as intermediaries with investors in the land identification and acquisition processes. Their dual role places them in a clear conflict of interest: their authority over land management enables them to facilitate



Development of agricultural land by investors: between discourse and reality. Irrigation works in an agricultural project, Pwani Region, Tanzania, 2016.



"Agricultural development policies of international institutions and donors, which postulate the inability of farmers to develop their own land, deploy infrastructural violence against them."

land acquisitions for investors, and thus benefit materially for them. Clientelist practices are deployed at all levels of governance and are intimately linked to land regulation initiatives. The discourse of international institutions which maintains that the solution to local land conflicts is the formalization and privatization of land is therefore paradoxical. On the contrary, considering these empirical data, their consequences are potentially disastrous for vulnerable populations in the event of their political capture.

Conclusion: infrastructural violence and local land conflicts

Agricultural development policies of international institutions and donors, which postulate the inability of farmers to develop their own land, deploy infrastructural violence against them. They severely limit African farmers' options for survival. On the one hand, they face the massive transfer of their land into the hands of investors that are more or less productive; on the other hand, they face a rather authoritarian and clientelistic state, which aims to increase its territorial power and political capacity through agricultural development and the formalization of land tenure. International actors cannot ignore the fact that the agricultural development strategies they promote lead to exclusion at the local level. Their role in promoting and consolidating this infrastructural violence is therefore a key element of causality at the macro-level that must be considered in analyses of the emergence and nature of local land conflict dynamics.

¹ Wondimu, T. & Gebresenbet, F. 2018. "Resourcing Land, Dynamics of Exclusion and Conflict in the Maji Area, Ethiopia." *Conflict, Security & Development* 18 (6), pp. 547-70.

² My analysis is based on a review of the empirical literature as well as on data collected during a nine-month political ethnography I conducted in Tanzania in 2016-2017.

³ Marginal land is land considered to have very little agricultural or industrial value.

⁴ De Soto, H. 2000. *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*. New York: Basic Books.

⁵ Makki, F. 2014. "Development by Dispossession: Terra Nullius and the Social-Ecology of New Enclosures in Ethiopia." *Rural Sociology* 79(1), pp. 79-103.

⁶ Arezki & al. 2011. cited in Brun, M. 2013. "Agricultural Transformations and Strategies from influence : How should Saudi land investments be read in Ethiopia ?" *Institut français des relations internationales*, p. 11.

⁷ GRAIN. 2018. "[Failed Farmland Deals. A Growing Legacy of Disaster and Pain](#)", p. 2.

⁸ Deininger, K. & Fang, X. 2018. "Assessing the Long-Term Performance of Large-Scale Land Transfers: Challenges and Opportunities in Malawi's Estate Sector." *World Development* 104 (April), pp. 281-96; Hules, M. & Simron, J-S. 2017. "India's Land Grab Deals in Ethiopia: Food Security or Global Politics ?" *Land Use Policy* 60, pp. 343-51.

⁹ Fekadu T.A., Amsalu, A., & Zoomers, E. B. 2018. "Failed Promises: Governance Regimes and Conflict Transformation Related to Jatropha Cultivation in Ethiopia." *Ecology and Society* 23 (4), p. 32.

¹⁰ Bergius, M., Benjaminsen, T., & Widgren, M. 2017. "Green Economy, Scandinavian Investments and Agricultural Modernization in Tanzania." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, pp. 825-52.

¹¹ Persson, A.G. M. 2019. *Foreign Direct Investment in Large-Scale Agriculture in Africa: Economic, Social and Environmental Sustainability in Ethiopia*. New York: Routledge.

¹² Bélair, J. 2019. *Farmland Investments in Tanzania: A Local Perspective on the Political Economy of Agri-Food Projects*. Ottawa, Canada : University of Ottawa.

¹³ Maru, S., & Rutten, M. 2015. "Impacts of Large-Scale Farming on Local Communities' Food Security and Income Levels - Empirical Evidence from Oromia Region, Ethiopia." *Land Use Policy* 47, pp. 282-92.

¹⁴ Murray, L-T. 2017. "Rendering Land Investible: Five Notes on Time." *Geoforum* 82, pp. 276-78.

¹⁵ Engström, L., Bélair, J., & Blache, A. 2018. "Conceptualizing Dispossession in the Global Land Rush: An Aggregated Analysis of Four Regions of Tanzania." Conference Paper presented at African studies association United Kingdom, Birmingham, UK, September, pp. 11-13.

¹⁶ Horne, F. 2011. "Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa. Country Report: Ethiopia." *Oakland Institute*.

Africa at Risk? The Global Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

By Jens Pedersen

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Writing in a personal capacity

Since the global spread of SARS-Cov-2, the virus causing COVID-19 disease, has grown into a global pandemic, media has not been short on commentary of just what this may mean for the future of our global order. These have differed from obituaries of globalization¹, to questioning the future of multilateral institutions², to the virus being "the great equalizer."³ Rather than speculative attempts to predict global political and economic consequences in the midst of a pandemic without any fixed timeframe, we should focus on what it reveals about the global order as it currently stands.

Even in this space, the field is increasingly crowded, globally and in Africa, by commentators analysing which is more damaging for Africa: the pandemic or the consequences of lockdown and other tools being instituted. Though these have swiftly moved on from Trumpian "the cure is worse

than the disease" narratives, we continue to be faced with strong criticism of lockdowns imposed by African governments, in spite of these being implemented much faster than in other countries affected by COVID-19. Notwithstanding the paucity of data on how public health challenges in Africa -such as different disease burdens and levels of poverty and the concomitant complications, and the structural deficiencies and challenges of our healthcare systems- may intersect with COVID-19, there is little attention paid to the fact that pandemics and outbreak responses are inherently political.

African political leaders' decisions must weigh numerous factors, some of which are political. In Africa and in many other developing country contexts, measures imposed are in part aimed at buying time, because the supplies needed to stem the pandemic are hardly available and healthcare systems are not ready to deal with an influx of critically ill patients. This is as much a public health decision as a political decision. The situation and the factors influencing political decisions are

not necessarily unique to Africa, though the crucial difference is the means, beyond delay, that African political leaders have available to fight COVID-19.

Political analyses of the global response to COVID-19 are therefore warranted. Again, without speculating as to the medium or long-term consequences of the pandemic, at the very least this exercise should begin with critical appraisals of current realities. At its most basic, and perhaps ironically, a global pandemic viewed by many as an inevitable consequence of globalization has resulted in isolationist and nationalist responses. Most countries in Africa, Europe and the Americas have closed their borders to travel and, more worryingly, many Global North countries in a position to help⁴ have sealed off their borders, preventing crucial aid and supplies from being shared and distributed. This has been exemplified by countries banning exports of medical supplies, as well as in the case of the European Union, welcoming medical expertise from developing countries, though at the same time refusing to extend similar solidarity towards the very same countries.

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The latter is not a pure public health decision, but rather a political decision signifying an inability to demonstrate actual solidarity and to consider a truly global strategy to stem the pandemic, which is by definition a global public health crisis. From one perspective, this highlights shortsighted and nationalistic attitudes. Furthermore, and from an African perspective, it rings hollow, given the numerous "Africa investments summits" held in 2019 and planned for 2020, or recently developed strategic plans for Africa, as in the case of the United States. These have seemingly been forgotten when it comes to supporting Africa in the pandemic.

During previous outbreaks, such as Ebola, we witnessed how a global response only occurs once pathogens cross certain borders. Regarding COVID-19, we are yet to witness a truly global response and one that demonstrates the right balance between protecting citizens and global public health.

It is unlikely that COVID-19 will mark the death of globalization. It is also irrelevant to the pandemic. The countries that have hitherto benefited from globalization and previously shown keen interest in investing in Africa should step up their efforts in support of, and in solidarity with, Africa. Otherwise, globalization, in its current pandemic form, will come at the expense of many human lives.

¹ Legrain, P. March 12 2020. "[The Coronavirus Is Killing Globalization as We Know It.](#)" *Foreign Policy*.

² *The Irish Times*. April 6 2020. "[The Irish Times view on global politics in a time of crisis: multilateralism under strain.](#)"

³ *The Washington Post*. April 5 2020. "[Gov. Cuomo is wrong, covid-19 is anything but an equalizer.](#)"

⁴ The EU Commission issued "guidance on export requirements" to countries outside of the EU, requiring cumbersome exemptions for all items exported from an EU member state to a country outside the EU. Though not legally binding, the guidance has hindered the supply of aid items useful for the COVID-19 response.

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

→ Niagalé Bagayoko

published in *Global Brief* "[Les forces africaines de défense et de sécurité face à la pandémie](#)", on April 7th, 2020.

She coordinated a report intitled "[l'Étude de référence sur l'état d'avancement de la gouvernance du secteur de la sécurité \(GSS\) et l'inclusion de la société civile dans les processus de réforme des systèmes de sécurité \(RSS\) au Nigeria, au Mali, au Cameroun et dans l'espace élargi de la CEDEAO](#)", in collaboration with the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* foundation, as part of the "Security for All" project co-financed by the European Union.

→ Bruno Charbonneau

participated in an [online](#) roundtable on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for international security on April 28th, 2020. This event was organized by the *Bill Graham Centre for Contemporary International History* and the *Toronto branch of the Canadian International Council*.



MINUSMA patrol in central Mali.

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