

# Accumulation by Dispossession: Climate Change and Natural Resources Governance in Africa \*

Global economic and political initiatives, allied with national governments and other national and multilateral players, are driving a process of massive land alienations in the developing world. The land alienations are located in a narrative of promoting Foreign Direct Investment which will stimulate the modernization of the agricultural sector through large-scale commercial farming, and thus ensure 'development' and food security. The impacts of the land alienations on local livelihoods and food security are predictable. What is less clear is how land alienation will impact social organization and in particular local institutional coherence and the governance of natural resource use at the local level. It can be anticipated that because land grabs also result in significant displacement of communities as well as loss of land and natural resource rights, these upheavals will weaken local governance capacities, especially in contexts already characterized by compromised local governance institutions such as contemporary Liberia after 133 years of predatory colonial rule and 14 years of civil war, or Ethiopia also ravaged by recurrent drought after decades of military rule and civil war.

Over the last decade or so, unprecedented amounts of land have been concessioned, leased or sold by developing country governments at bargain basement prices to new investors with the support and funding of international financial institutions and hedge funds. 'In developing countries, as many as 227 million hectares of land – an area the size of Western Europe – has been sold or leased since 2001, mostly to international investors' (Oxfam 2011:2). These expropriations are rationalized through a development discourse. While it remains challenging to get official data on contemporary land deals from registries, various studies have effectively demonstrated a recent marked increase in land transfer (Arezki et al 2011; Anseeuw et al 2013), with Africa being the main target of the land rush. Of the publicly reported deals, 948 land acquisitions

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totalling 134 million hectares are located in Africa. This compares with 43 million hectares reported for Asia, 19 million hectares in Latin America, and 5.4 million hectares in other regions, particularly Eastern Europe and Oceania (Anseeuw et al 2012). There are also significant variations in sizes of land transfers between countries (Arezki et al 2011). In addition to land acquisitions for agriculture and other productive purposes, it would appear that most speculative land deals are done in Africa (Hall 2011).

Africa is the site of most of these new investments in land because land is cheaper in Africa than anywhere else. This is possible because it is customary land that is expropriated. The land's prices are arbitrarily set by governments in negotiations with the investors which typically do not include any consultations with or prior informed consent of the affected communities. Again, this is possible because landholders under customary tenure regimes are considered to be merely in possession of the land without any real legal status in most African countries. Within customary tenure regimes, commons lands are even more vulnerable to expropriation as they are not physically possessed, are deemed to be under-utilized or unutilized, and thus can be expropriated in 'national interest' through government-led interventions as part of the 'national development' process. Yet the commons have been demonstrated to play a vital role in local livelihoods, and are at the base of many local natural resources governance institutions. Thus destabilization of the commons is likely to have significant ramifications for local governance.

The current wave of extensive foreign land alienation and the intensification of export-oriented large-scale farming has in many ways continued the process of

accumulation by dispossession that was characteristic of earlier phases of colonialism in both settler and non-settler colonies in Africa (Moyo et al 2013). An enduring outcome of these historical processes in the agricultural sectors has been the creation and consolidation of social relations of production that are based on repressive agrarian relations. These social relations also defined the nature of the state and the extent to which citizens could participate in governance (Mamdani 1996). Agrarian labour relations are based on specific land-labour utilization relations that are created principally through land dispossession. Land ownership is central to the emergence of these agrarian labour relations. Land owners are typically hirers of labour while the landless are forced to sell their labour power.

The mechanisms, scale and pace of land acquisitions in Africa have led to the phenomenon being dubbed 'The New Scramble' for Africa:

Fifty years ago the decolonization of Africa began. The next half-century may see the continent recolonized. But the new imperialism will be less benign. Great powers aren't interested in administering wild places any more, still less in settling them: just raping them. Black gangster governments sponsored by self-interested Asian or Western powers could become the central story in 21st-century African history.

Capitalist economic growth is fundamentally a process of accumulation. In its neo-liberal phase, this accumulation has been achieved through a sustained process of dispossession, reminiscent of dispossession processes of the colonial era. In Africa this is evident through such processes as land grabbing by global financial interests assisted by the state, and other forms of resource expropriation. The land is usually concessioned to foreign investors for purposes of investing in export crop production. The state in most cases will guarantee tenure security (usually in the form of very long-term leases), tax breaks, as well as repatriation of profits and other favourable

terms of investment. As with colonial dispossession, the combination of land alienation, extra-economic regulation and taxes will turn the agrarian economies of participating countries into labour reserve economies reliant on cheap domestic labour, and sometimes also on migrant labour.

In the agriculture concessions sector, it would appear that the justification for allocating land away from the peasantry and smallholders to large-scale commercial agriculture, in addition to FDI and its contribution to GDP, is the 'modernization' of the agrarian sector. Much of Africa's land is held under customary tenure regimes of one form or another. Only a small proportion of these lands are under permanent agriculture. Predominantly across the continent, smallholder agriculture consists of a mix of rain-fed crop production and pastoralism. The absence of individualized title and the predominant farming systems have led to national governments and international organizations such as the World Bank arguing that arable lands are underutilized in Africa. Thus the World Bank has referred to the continent's millions of square kilometres of unfenced savanna as 'the world's last large reserve of underused land'. The solution to Africa's food insecurity challenge is thus seen in the modernization of the sector by replacing small-holder agriculture with large-scale commercial agriculture.

The displacement occasioned by agricultural commercialization is not considered problematic in this perspective, which views formal wage labour in the large concessions as superior to self-employment on the peasant farms. Self-employment of the peasantry, which does not fit the neo-classical criteria of employment, is not considered to contribute to GDP. In addition, displacement also removes access to land and natural resources for the peasant household. Even for those households that remain on the land as labour tenants or sharecroppers, they experience new tenure insecurities under the modified agrarian relations. More information is required to understand the extent to which wage labour actually produces better returns than self-employment and other livelihood forms available to the peasant household. The different forms of farm and non-farm employment that emerge from the new land use patterns

and social and economic conditions under which labour is employed after these radical land distributions should also be assessed, as should the tenure implications of the leasing of land to concessionaires, and the implications of wages and tenure on food security.

The dispossession and proletarianization of the peasantry is contested in many different ways by the dispossessed. But principally the contestations focus on the conditions under which labour is deployed in the accumulation process (led by labour movements) and the distribution of the benefits of accumulation (or rather the privatization of the benefits of accumulation by a small national and global elite (this contestation is usually led by social movements and NGOs). The resultant struggles waged by the dispossessed to improve their material conditions must also be explored and analyzed.

Dispossession and displacement have the potential to create the labour reserve economy produced by settler colonialism in Africa. In this economy, the peasantry is confined to small patches of unproductive land, insufficient in both qualitative and quantitative terms to sustain the ability of a peasant household to reproduce itself, thus forcing members of the household into the wage-labour economy. The labour reserve also serves to subsidize wages by providing at least some of the subsistence needs of the household. Typically, the household then deploys its male members into wage labour while the female members remain as unwaged labour in the subsistence sector to meet the reproduction deficits of the wage laborers. This represents a regressive feminization of labour in the peasant sector.

The predominant policy argument that agriculture modernization through large-scale commercial farming generates employment and consequently leads to improved livelihoods and food security is contrary to existing evidence. For instance, evidence from South Africa, where agriculture in the former homelands was decimated by apartheid policies, indicates that the main cause of hunger and malnutrition is not the shortage of food but, rather, inadequate access to food by some categories of the population. Moreover, among such groups, food insecurity is endemic. This is because these groups depend on food

supplies purchased from commercial sources, and are thus dependent on direct or indirect access to cash to secure their food supplies. Access to cash is not secure as unemployment levels are high. Such a scenario is likely to be replicated throughout the continent as rural populations are displaced by land grabs and forced into wage labour, in situations where the opportunities to sell their labour are limited or non-existent. Across the continent, the poor and food-insecure generally have a narrow economic resource base with few options for expanding their incomes, either on- or off-farm.

The land alienations are occurring at a critical moment in the historical trajectories of devolution of natural resource governance in Africa, and are rationalized through a discourse of good governance and pro-poor development. The importance of 'good governance' for economic development, poverty reduction and growth in Africa has been emphasized by multi-lateral financial institutions, aid agencies and academics over the last decades. Governance and policies are about how trade-offs and conflicting interests are dealt with in a given society. Social institutions, laws and policies are shaped by power relations between stakeholders in the society. These stakeholders' practices influence, enforce or contest laws, policies and regulations as well as the conditions under which rights, benefits, and entitlements to services and livelihoods are produced and distributed. Institutional arrangements develop and are modified by changes in the distribution of entitlements, rights and obligations.

Institutions that have evolved over long periods of common property management, and which have become highly sophisticated in governing relations between stakeholders at the local level, and between local and other stakeholders, will be distorted by land alienations, leading to the weakening of local regulations regarding resource use and thus precipitating unprecedented natural resource degradation. This is likely to have negative ramifications for adaptation to climate change, reduce the potential of the commons to contribute to food security, and lead to downstream erosion of the capacities of local communities to exercise their citizenship rights in society.

A lot of data is now being generated and interpreted on the processes, outcomes and effects of the current wave of land alienations in Africa. The debate covers a wide range of subjects, including the economic, social and political implications of these dynamics. This proposal is to contribute to this emerging debate through secondary research which will use existing data, combined with supplementary data generated from selected case study countries, to analyze the implications of the land alienations for natural resource governance and local livelihoods in communal tenure systems in the context of climate change.

The foundational hypothesis guiding this investigation is that land alienation is occurring in communal tenure regimes precisely because the African states have maintained ambiguous legal status of these regimes in order to allow for arbitrary state intervention in the governance of lands and natural resources held in common. Consequently, institutional capacity to govern the commons is already compromised by the high levels of existing state interventionism. Large land alienations in these regimes will constitute an unprecedented shock leading to rapid institutional atrophy as communities are displaced, land and resource rights are lost and livelihoods are redefined. These shocks will not only erode local governance capacities, but will also redefine local state relationships in ways that may compromise the democratization process on the continent.

\* Building on Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation' of capital, David Harvey (2003) uses the concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' to describe contemporary processes of expropriatory capital accumulation. Thus in addition to the speculative financialization, stock promotions, ponzi schemes etc. of the twenty-first century, the new forms of dispossession include enclosures of the commons, the commodification of nature, culture, histories and intellectual creativity; corporatization of

public assets; privatization of public utilities, and so on (Harvey, D. 2003: 145-52 passim)

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