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Land investments are too often considered to be land grabbing

Improving land governance requires better analysis

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Improving land governance requires better analysis **LAND INVESTMENTS ARE TOO OFTEN CONSIDERED TO BE LAND GRABBING**

Over the last ten years, a surge in literature has over-emphasized the extent of land grabbing. Recent studies find that such analyses were often flawed. Context-specific analyses are required to guide investments.

From 2007-8 until today, an unprecedented number of articles, special journal issues, books and reports highlighting the theme of 'land grabbing' have swept the fields of land, agriculture and natural resource studies. However, scholars now acknowledge that a more careful examination of land acquisition practices is required. Much of the 'land grabbing' by foreign investors that was reported back then turned out to be perfectly voluntary or simply never materialized. Over-reporting of land deals was the order of the day.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Replace generalized 'land grabbing' analyses with country- and context-specific analyses of land acquisition practices.
- Target interventions at the context-specific laws and authorities that govern rights to land. These may change over time as laws and power relations change.
- Better land governance requires the involvement of actors at various levels, from the local via the national to the global. The relative strength of actors differs from one context to another.

In Tanzania, for instance, more than a million hectares were reported as having been acquired by foreign investors, but subsequent checking only uncovered deals for around 200,000 hectares. Nonetheless a number of policy initiatives, not least on the international level, have been aimed at preventing land grabbing through guidelines and governance frameworks. However, if the analyses were flawed, these policy recommendations may turn out to have been misguided.

New analytical perspectives are required

A new special section – ‘Beyond Land Grabbing: Old Morals and New Perspectives on Contemporary Investments’ – in *Geoforum* identifies three interrelated perspectives that can guide analyses and interventions. These perspectives render investment processes more contingent than they are often depicted:

- **New forms of commodification.** Investments should be analyzed as context-specific operations that most often involve domestic investors or state actors. It should not be assumed that a foreign corporate takeover of agriculture is taking place.
- **Changing authority structures.** The institutions that govern access to land are shaped by local, national and international factors, but their configurations are context-specific and should be analyzed as such. Sometimes, local authorities will have the upper hand, sometimes the national authorities will. Whether order or disorder prevails and the degree to which smallholders can influence decisions and resist investment projects depend on the context and the character of the political economy.
- **A reconfiguration of rights over time.** Investments have often been likened to colonial and postcolonial land and resource grabbing, with legal and institutional reforms being dismissed as mere window-dressing. Whereas this may be the case in some places, recent empirical research suggests that this is not always so. The derailment of numerous investment projects, often by legal means, suggests that a priori assumptions about the outcomes of investment projects should be abandoned.

Policy interventions should be context specific

A wave of policy and best practice guidelines followed in the wake of the land grabbing panic in 2007-8, produced by international organizations like the FAO, OECD, the African Union, the Committee on World Food Security and the World Bank in association with IFAD and UNCTAD. Based on analyses of the land grabbing phenomenon, these guidelines outline generalized recommendations that have helped direct attention towards potential infringements of rights related to transactions in land. However, the recommendations are not always precise with regard to how the specific institutions in specific geographical locations should be reformed in order to be able to prevent these consequences more effectively.

In the best practice guidelines, there is a tendency to emphasize what states ought to do to prevent land grabbing. Most notably, the FAO’s Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (2012) mentions what ‘states should do’ no less than 164 times. However, the juridical and administrative capacity of many developing countries is limited. Therefore, the real challenge is less a lack of policy prescriptions than guidance in making the existing institutions work better. In fact, the central state institutions may not always be the best place to start on a continent where traditional authorities and local government often have a big say over matters relating to land.

Therefore, context-specific analyses are required in order to determine whether there is a problem in a country and, if so, what it is and which relevant actors are likely to solve it. Interventions should target these problems and these actors. Working with the state is likely to be important for reasons of scale, but doing so requires country- and context-specific interventions. Furthermore, one may face the challenge that countries where land grabbing is indeed a major issue are often characterized by institutions that are not really interested in preserving existing tenure rights. Making them interested should be part of the exercise.

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Cover photo: Workers at a company in Tanzania that produces seeds for export to European farmers © Panos Pictures/Sven Torfinn

