



# Rural resource grabs or necessary inward investment?

The politics of land and water  
in Africa

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Ruth Hall

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What has happened since the furore broke over the corporate land rush in Africa? Field-based research has exposed new realities that challenge the linear suggestions of a ‘grab’. As the process unfolds and our understanding deepens, the single narrative of the ‘land grab’ fractures into multiple messy elements. New perspectives have emerged, which reinforce the view that such a grab is underway, yet complicate our understanding of who is doing this, why, how, where and with what results. At the same time, a ‘governance rush’ has seen a proliferation of international frameworks that try to regulate, rather than stop, corporate and elite acquisitions of African land and water.

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# Summary

In the past decade, the global academic and activist worlds have witnessed a rapid explosion of evidence and debates concerning a 'global land grab'. The recent growth in large-scale land deals has been attributed to the crises in global food, fuel and financial systems that have combined to raise the perceived value of farmland as a productive resource as well as an investment commodity. While there is relatively broad consensus concerning the drivers of the trend, its dynamics, outcomes and significance remain the centre of heated debate. Diverse characterisations of what was underway represented this variously as a corporate takeover or, more euphemistically, the 'rising interest in global farmland'. What was widely agreed was that:

- A qualitatively and quantitatively new era of privatisation and commercialisation was underway
- An abuse of power by national host governments and local intermediaries as well as foreign investors was leading to the loss of resources for local people in the areas targeted for investment and
- While substantial transformations were also underway in Southeast Asia and parts of Latin America, the reported deals suggested that Africa was at the centre of this global trend.

In this period, with mounting and damaging evidence of investments flouting human rights standards and dispossessing local people of land and water, contestation has evolved over who will define the processes to regulate investments in African farmland and other key natural resources. From the Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO's) Committee on World Food Security to the World Bank, the African Union and Group of Eight (G8), there has been a proliferation of initiatives to respond to this. These initiatives have sought to curb the dispossession and displacement that such investments have produced, while also enabling the transfer of land and other resource rights to allow new investments that hold the promise of increasing agricultural productivity and contributing to food security at national, regional and global levels.

Global rights groups, campaigning organisations, African civil farmers' associations, rural movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have supported some of these initiatives (such as the African Union process and, by and large, the FAO process) while challenging others (such as the World Bank process) which they see as promoting self-regulation

by the private sector investors. They have argued that a 'code of conduct' approach, rather than reversing the resource grab, will facilitate it. Supported by several international NGOs and campaigning organisations, peasant movements and others have intensified their opposition to corporate expansion as the route to agricultural commercialisation. They have argued instead for investments in local farmers. This counter movement challenges the dominant concept of food security that underpins this new phase of private investment in African agriculture; a concept which centres on increasing total factor productivity and aggregate output at the national level. An alternative conception is one of food sovereignty and, allied to that, land sovereignty. These notions are contested even within these movements, but, in Africa, have found little traction outside civil society groups that have built links with similar groups elsewhere, in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

As the master narrative of the 'land grab' – or more broadly the 'resource grab' – was interrogated through extensive field-based research across many African countries, new realities emerged that challenged the linear suggestions of a 'grab'. Reality subverts each element of this neat storyline. As the process unfolds and our understanding deepens, the single narrative of the 'land grab' fractures into multiple messy elements. New perspectives have emerged. These reinforce the view that such a grab is underway, yet complicate our understanding of who is doing this, why, how, where and with what results. Five such themes relate to the resources being lost or acquired:

- Does the 'land grab' in fact constitute a 'water grab'?
- What is the significance of domestic and small-scale acquisitions in comparison to foreign acquisitions?
- Is the growing social and economic differentiation being driven by these investments, as some people benefit and others lose out?
- What are the consequences of the financialisation of agriculture and the entry of new financial sector actors seeking to convert natural resources into financial commodities for trade and profit?
- What is the relationship between resource grabs and market expansion by corporations involved in the food system upstream and downstream from primary production?

In the diversity of all these situations, the resource grab needs to be understood as highly fractured, with diverse drivers, actors, interests and outcomes.

The debate on the 'land grab' or resource grab underway in Africa – its scale, significance, impact and necessary responses – has evolved rapidly since 2008 and, I argue, has been in part captured by the growing 'governance' agenda. It is now widely accepted that, in recent years, 'investments' in Africa have amounted to a resource grab, rather than a 'win-win' arrangement for all parties. Reports by a broad spectrum of institutions have presented damning evidence of the negative impacts of large-scale land leasing and concessions, giving mainstream credibility to the charge that 'land grabs' were underway. But this quickly gave way to a multiplicity of initiatives driven by Northern governments, development agencies and financial institutions – and even corporate investors themselves – to regulate the resource grab rather than to stop or reverse it. In other words, they addressed how to improve the governance of transactions without challenging the direction of change in who controls resources. Premised on narratives of global scarcity and the compelling argument that Africa urgently needs private investment in agriculture to feed itself and the world, such initiatives have shifted the terrain of debate away from how to stop the resource grab. Instead, they focus on how to promote land-based investments in a responsible manner and to regulate how land, water and other natural resources are transacted and rights transferred from existing users to new ones.

This article reviews changes in rights to land and water in Africa, the growing demand for these resources, and their development outcomes – above all for poor people who depend on these resources for their livelihoods. It outlines the main drivers and outcomes of the 'resource grab' in Africa and how these have changed in the last eight to ten years. It explores the debates about whether land deals constitute 'investment' or 'grabs' of Africa's land and water. Such debates arise not only from incomplete information (though that remains a challenge), but also from opposing political beliefs and conceptions of 'development' and 'food security'. Finally, the paper explores what the policy implications are for African states that face contradictory demands within their domestic constituencies. Also it explores these policy implications in the context of the growing number of public–private partnerships and a proliferation of regulatory frameworks; strategic questions for civil society and activist organisations that campaign for resource rights.

## 1

# Introduction

In the past decade, the global academic and activist worlds have witnessed a rapid explosion of evidence and debates concerning a 'global land grab'. The rapid increase in large-scale land deals has been attributed to crises in global food, fuel and financial systems that have combined to raise the perceived value of farmland as a productive resource as well as an investment commodity (Cotula *et al.*, 2009; Borras *et al.*, 2011; Arezki *et al.*, 2013; Kaag and Zoomers, 2014). While there is relatively broad consensus concerning the drivers of the trend, its dynamics, outcomes and significance remain the centre of heated debate. Diverse characterisations of what was underway represented this variously as a corporate takeover (GRAIN, 2008) or, more euphemistically, as the 'rising interest in global farmland' (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011). What was widely agreed was that:

- A qualitatively and quantitatively new era of privatisation and commercialisation was underway
- The abuse of power by national host governments and local intermediaries as well as foreign investors was leading to the loss of resources for local people in the areas targeted for investment
- While substantial transformations were also underway in Southeast Asia and parts of Latin America, the reported deals suggested that Africa was at the centre of this global trend (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011, Land Matrix, 2014).

In this period, with mounting and damaging evidence of investments flouting human rights standards and dispossessing local people of land and water, contestation has evolved over who will define the processes to regulate investments in African farmland and other key natural resources (Margulis *et al.*, 2013). From the FAO's Committee on World Food Security

to the World Bank, the African Union and Group of Eight (G8), there has been a proliferation of initiatives to respond to this. These initiatives sought to curb the dispossession and displacement that such investments have produced, while also enabling the transfer of land and other resource rights to enable new investments that hold the promise of increasing agricultural productivity and contributing to food security at national, regional and global levels.

Global rights groups, campaigning organisations, African civil farmers' associations, rural movements and NGOs have supported some of these initiatives (such as the African Union process and, by and large, the FAO process) while challenging others (such as the World Bank process), which they see as promoting self-regulation by the private sector investors. They have argued that a 'code of conduct' approach, rather than reversing the resource grab, will facilitate it (Borras and Franco, 2010). Supported by several international NGOs and campaigning organisations, peasant movements and others have intensified their opposition to corporate expansion as the route to agricultural commercialisation. They have argued instead for investments in local farmers. This counter-movement challenges the dominant concept of food security that underpins this new phase of private investment in African agriculture; a concept that centres on increasing total factor productivity and aggregate output at the national level. An alternative conception is one of food sovereignty and, allied to that, land sovereignty (Edelman *et al.*, 2014). These notions are contested even within these movements, but, in Africa, have found little traction outside civil society groups that have built links with similar groups elsewhere, in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

This article reviews the changes in rights to land and water in Africa, the growing demand for these resources, and their development outcomes – above all for poor people who depend on these resources for their livelihoods. It outlines the main drivers and outcomes of the ‘resource grab’ in Africa and how these have changed in the last eight to ten years. It explores the debates about whether land deals constitute ‘investment’ or ‘grabs’ of Africa’s land and water. Such debates arise not only from incomplete information (though that remains a challenge), but also from opposing political beliefs and conceptions of ‘development’ and ‘food security’. Finally, the paper explores what the policy implications are for African states that face contradictory demands within their domestic constituencies. It also explores the policy implications in the context of the growing number of public–private partnerships and a proliferation of regulatory frameworks; strategic questions for civil society and activist organisations that campaign for resource rights.

## 2

# Evolution of the debate

The debate on the 'land grab' or resource grab underway in Africa, its scale, significance, impact and necessary responses, has evolved rapidly since 2008 and, I argue, has been in part captured by the growing 'governance' agenda.

The first phase of the land grab debate centred on drawing from anecdotal and media reports, development indicators and metrics to understand the scale and distribution of land grabs. Examples include the GRAIN briefing paper '*Seized! The 2008 land grab for food and financial security*', based on a compilation of media reports (GRAIN, 2008), and other research reports (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009; Cotula *et al.*, 2009; Smaller and Mann, 2009). The work of compiling data continues, with the re-launch of the Land Matrix<sup>1</sup> in 2014, now with more traceable data and clear parameters – for example, only deals larger than 200 ha are included. Since many deals are still under negotiation and others have failed, only 957 land deals are now recorded as 'concluded' on the Land Matrix. Southeast Asia is the region with the highest number of concluded deals (299), followed by East Africa with (251) (see Figure 1). West Africa has fewer (118), while the data for Southern Africa show far fewer concluded deals (5). This draws into question the dataset itself, given the extent of the known deals in, for example, Mozambique and Zambia (Hall, 2011). The disputes over how to count land deals sit astride a more fundamental question of how to define them, producing widely divergent pictures emerging from these efforts at quantification (Edelman, 2013; Oya 2013a; Scoones *et al.*, 2013).

While being cognisant of concerns about methodology in all the quantitative measures of land deals, the available Land Matrix data does show some clusters

that suggest spatial and political trends worthy of interrogation. Not surprisingly, countries that do not feature strongly are those with low rainfall and extensive arid rangelands (Namibia, Botswana and much of the Sahel and North Africa), those experiencing major civil conflict (Central African Republic) or where farmland is largely already privately titled (South Africa). On the basis of the extent of land under negotiation or already acquired through concluded deals (see Figure 2), the countries that initially appeared to be at the centre of the 'land grab' were South Sudan, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Congo. While diverse, they have in common extensive indigenous forests and high rainfall areas. But while deals may be agreed in conflict zones, they may not materialise until conditions become more conducive to commercial operations, as has been seen in South Sudan over the past few years (Deng, 2013). While Ethiopia and Mozambique are the countries with the most deals, to date the transactions involving the largest areas have taken place in South Sudan, DRC, Mozambique and Liberia (see Figure 2). Relative to its size, the transactions in Liberia have involved the largest area.

Interesting as these quantitative measures are, they are also problematic in that they obscure important differences in the value and (actual or potential) use of the land transacted. Scoones *et al.* (2013: p. 469) draw attention to the 'politics of evidence' surrounding land deals, identifying 'a profound uncertainty about what it is that is being counted'. They question the methods used to collate and aggregate land grab data and call for 'a second phase of land grab research which abandons the aim of deriving the total number of hectares in favour of more specific, grounded and transparent methods'

<sup>1</sup> [www.landmatrix.org](http://www.landmatrix.org)

Figure 1: Numbers of land deals under negotiation or concluded in all African countries

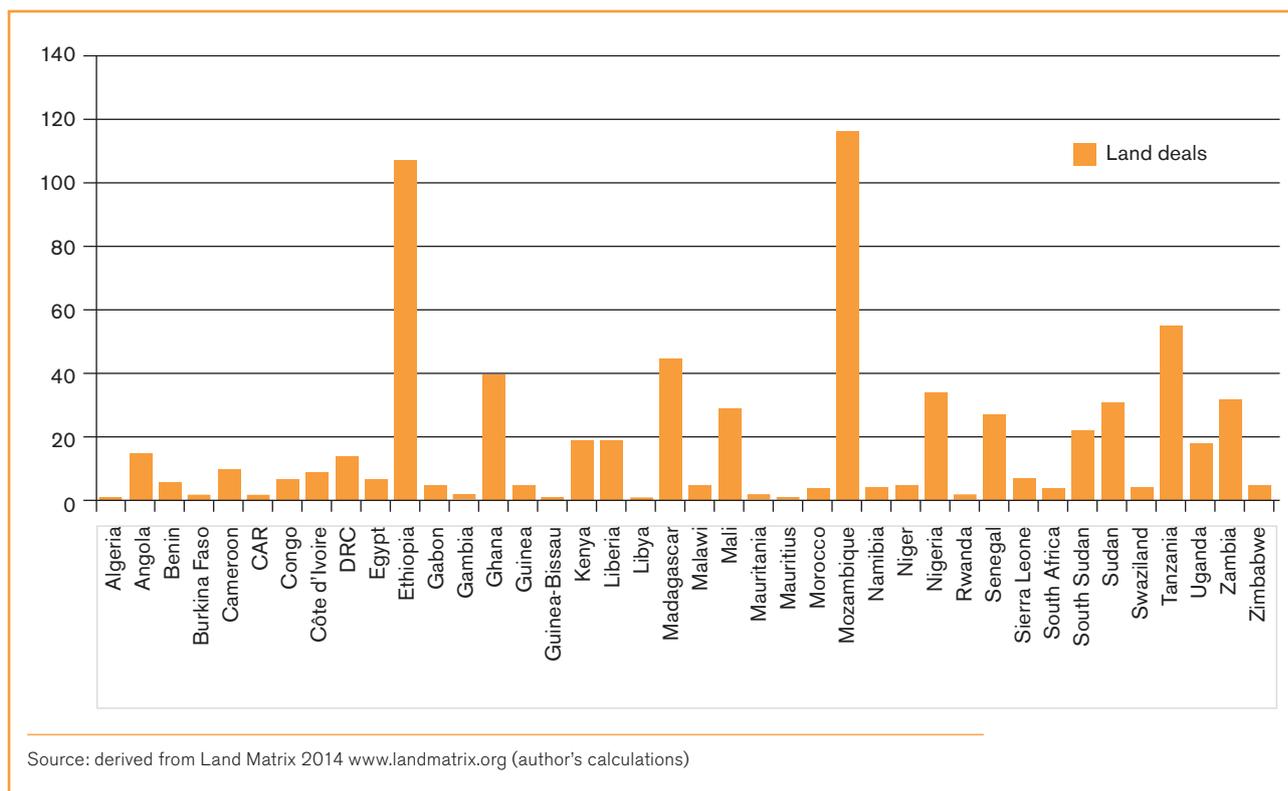
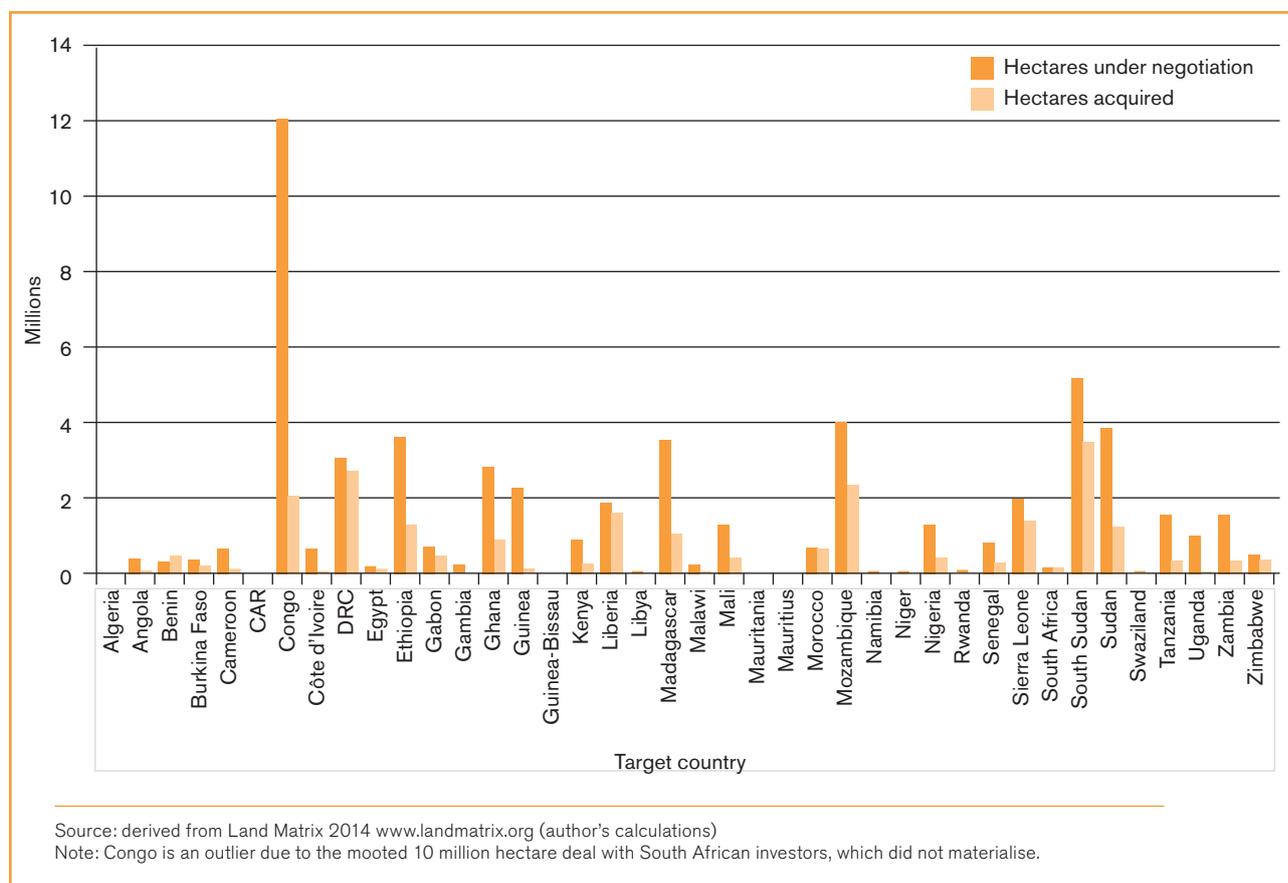


Figure 2: Total hectares under negotiation and confirmed through contracts or leases



(see also Locher and Sulle 2013). The numbers, such as provided by the Land Matrix, provide a compelling indication of a dramatic phenomenon. But ultimately, aggregating hectares tells us very little, about the land and the people or the companies involved, and, therefore, the kinds of changes underway in social relations, ecosystems and economic systems. Water availability, now and in the future, is a key and a largely invisible, variable differentiating the deals. This means that the relatively small concessions in the DRC, Gabon, Congo, Mozambique and parts of South Sudan – some of which are for logging indigenous forests – may be of greater value than more extensive leases in other countries.

The second phase of the land grab debate focused on understanding processes of acquisition and the impacts of land grabs at the local level. This period saw the emergence of a vast literature of case studies and comparative studies depicting local stories, struggles and outcomes, with attention being given to national political economies and legal and policy frameworks. This rich body of knowledge addresses diverse questions and, while it is of variable quality (Edelman, 2013; Oya, 2013a; Scoones *et al.*, 2013), has thrown up many questions concerning the need to secure rights while also attracting investment. This extensive empirical research has drawn into question the assumptions underpinning African governments' support for many such deals, namely that allocating large tracts of land to foreign companies will bring about economic growth and structural transformation of the economy (AU *et al.*, 2013). The academic research literature has almost universally disproved this claim in relation to specific case studies (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011; White *et al.*, 2012; among many others).

Contrary to the common perception that big land deals involve large populations being displaced from their land, research has also drawn attention to the differential ways in which people are either excluded from, included in and benefit from, or are adversely incorporated (Smalley *et al.*, 2014 on sugar outgrowers in Tanzania). Large-scale land deals may involve compensation and the offer of jobs for some (often men), while women's access to water, forest resources and other common property may be lost without compensation (Englert and Daley, 2008; Tsikata and Yaro, 2014). Those with capital may be able to take advantage of new commercial activity in their area by investing in enterprises in the non-farm economy to generate new streams of income. Young people might be excluded from participation in the rural economy through loss of land – the failure of intergenerational transfer – or may establish new livelihoods within new farm investments or in related value chains (Hakizimana, 2014).

A recent comparative study undertaken by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) together with the World Bank, addressed the performance of such investments and impacts on local communities (UNCTAD and World Bank, 2014). This review of 39 'mature' agricultural investments in Africa and Southeast Asia debunks, rather devastatingly, the view that land-based investments that lead to land loss for local people can be justified on the basis of overall job creation and higher incomes. Job creation was one of the main expected benefits from these investments. Indeed, about 40,000 jobs were created by these 39 investments. However, the number of jobs fell far short of projected employment creation, with, on average, just one job per 20 hectares. Of these, about half were temporary, casual or seasonal, and just under 50 per cent were permanent jobs. More rarely in evidence were benefits in the form of technology transfer to local farmers, another priority reason for advancing large-scale investments. At the same time, local residents and stakeholders regularly cited loss of access to land and water as negative effects of these investments (UNCTAD and World Bank, 2014: p. xiii). Investments that avoid land acquisition and focus on value-chain participation were deemed more successful in avoiding resource-based conflicts. Here the main challenges were access to finance for local farmers and other value-chain actors (UNCTAD and World Bank, 2014: p. xiv). Unsurprisingly, conflicts over land were more severe in cases where investors were using only a portion of the land they had acquired. Corroborating other studies (AU *et al.*, 2014), this one found that land loss ranked as the biggest negative impact of land-based investments, challenging the optimistic view (World Bank, 2009: p. xvi) that land-based investments would take advantage of idle land or wasteland.

The third phase of the land grab debate has seen growing questioning of the phenomenon, its meaning and relationship to wider transformations in a globalising world. Many of the mooted mega-deals were never concluded (Land Policy Initiative 2014). Some that were concluded were not implemented. Many of those that were implemented only produced on a fraction of the land acquired and at the scale promised and some of these, in turn, collapsed as investors withdrew for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the 'land grab' is not so big after all. Perhaps it was a temporary blip. To what degree is the current pattern distinct from prior enclosures? What is being 'grabbed' and how do we know it has been grabbed? While some of the literature has questioned the methods used for understanding land deals and the categories involved (Scoones *et al.*, 2013), others have emphasised the diversity of forms of land grab, pointing to more incremental and long-term processes of change – concentration of ownership and accumulation of wealth – which challenge the 'land grab' label (Kaag and Zoomers, 2014).

## 3

# Grappling with complexity: beyond the single ‘land grab’ narrative

As the master narrative of the ‘land grab’ – or, more broadly, the ‘resource grab’ – was interrogated through extensive field-based research across many African countries, new realities emerged which challenged the linear suggestions of a ‘grab’. Reality subverts each element of this neat storyline. As the process unfolds and our understanding deepens, the single narrative of the ‘land grab’ fractures into multiple messy elements. New perspectives have emerged that reinforce the view that such a grab is underway, yet complicate our understanding of who is doing this, why, how, where and with what results. Five such themes relate to the resources being lost or acquired:

- Whether the ‘land grab’ in fact constitutes a ‘water grab’
- The significance of domestic and small-scale acquisitions in comparison to foreign acquisitions
- The growing social and economic differentiation being driven by these investments, as some people benefit and others lose out
- The financialisation of agriculture and entry of new financial sector actors seeking to convert natural resources into financial commodities for trade and profit

- The relationship between resource grabs and market expansion by corporations involved in the food system upstream and downstream from primary production.

In the diversity of all these situations, the resource grab needs to be understood as highly fractured, with diverse drivers, actors, interests and outcomes.

## From land grab to water grab

First, not only land is being grabbed. Mehta *et al.*, (2012) have pointed out that while ‘land grabs’ have captured the headlines, the interconnectedness of land and water in farming systems means that water is also being grabbed. Yet ‘water grabs’ are more complex to understand and to quantify: ‘the fluid nature of water and its hydrologic complexity often obscure how water grabbing takes place and what the associated impacts on the environment and diverse social groups are’ (Mehta *et al.*, 2012: p. xx). Much of Africa’s land may well be under-utilised compared to its potential, as the World Bank (2009, see also Deininger and Byerlee 2011) and its land use modellers (Fischer and Shah, 2010) remind us. Yet the land sought and acquired by

investors is usually precisely that which is most prized by local farmers: fertile land with good rainfall or irrigation potential, close to urban centres and close to transport networks (Oxfam, 2011). As GRAIN (2012) observed in its report on water grabs, aptly titled *Squeezing Africa Dry*:

*'Those who have been buying up vast areas of farmland in recent years, whether they are based in Addis Ababa, Dubai or London, realise that the access to water they gain, often included for free or without restriction, may well be worth more in the long term than the land deals themselves.'* (GRAIN, 2012)

Rights to water are seldom explicit, but are almost always implied in land deals. 'Stabilisation' clauses in contracts between African states and private investors prohibit states from taking actions that may impede the profitable operation of private enterprises for the duration of long-term leases, and entitle lessees to water take-off from rivers and catchments (Smaller and Mann, 2009; Cotula, 2011). Such stabilisation clauses 'commit governments to not alter regulatory frameworks in a way that undermines the economic viability of the investment' (Howse, 2011). In this way they constrain the policy autonomy of host countries and expose them to the risk of being sued in international investment tribunals should they institute measures that jeopardise the profitability of international investments – even if such measures are essential for the well-being and resource access of their own citizens (Cotula, 2011). This is indeed a diluting of national sovereignty (Sassen, 2013). While such clauses are standard requirements presented by investors in negotiations with national governments, the African Union and FAO guidelines on land-based investments have paid little attention to them.

So are land deals driving water grabs? GRAIN (2012) and Mehta *et al.* (2012) argue the opposite, that access to water is what is driving land deals. Indeed, demand for large areas of farmland is directly correlated with the availability of water for rainfed and irrigated production. The absence of any major transnational land deals in Namibia, for instance, reflects this (Land Matrix, 2014). Other factors shaping the demand for land and water in Africa include urban and industrial expansion, the growing number of major hydropower projects (in DRC, Ethiopia, Namibia, and Mozambique) and other non-farm projects cashing in on the growth of the African middle class and Africa as a destination market for leisure and tourism. Land deals involve the transfer not only of water rights, but also access to forests. As Sulle and Nelson (2014) have observed in Tanzania, clear-cutting of indigenous hardwood forests has proved a highly profitable sideline for biofuels investors and could even

constitute the primary business motivation behind such investments, not least as several biofuels investments have failed to materialise. In the case of the Bioshape investment at Kilwa, on Tanzania's coastal belt, the exit of a biofuels investor after just two years, having clear-cut the indigenous forest. This has left communities dispossessed of their land and forests, and without the feasible option of returning to either, as the land remains subject to a 98-year lease and the forest no longer exists (Sulle and Nelson, 2014).

Attempts to quantify the extent of the water being grabbed and to forecast the implications for the future have foundered on a critical lack of robust data. One attempt by Rulli *et al.* (2013) to put numbers to the 'water grab', gathered data on grabbed land in 62 countries to evaluate the 'virtual water' transfer involved in food and biofuel transferred from grabbed to grabbing countries. Using FAO data on agro-ecological zones and time series data on rainfall and weather conditions, they generated scenarios for rainfed 'green water' farming and irrigated 'blue water' farming in order to estimate the re-allocation of water that forms part of land deals. Their data suggest that Indonesia is the most water-grabbed country, followed by Sudan and Tanzania. Looking at water per unit area, Cameroon, Papua New Guinea and Tanzania are the biggest targets for 'water grabs'. The water is not only diverted to new uses and users, but in many cases exported as 'virtual water' in the form of commodities – as food, biofuels and other crops – to distant markets (Allan *et al.*, 2012). But Rulli *et al.* (2013) have been criticised for their claims of scientific rigour and publication of precise figures, all of which rest on data that is known to be incorrect (see for instance Scoones *et al.*, 2013, reply by Rulli *et al.*, 2013 and rebuttal by Scoones *et al.*, 2013).

## A continuum: from foreign corporations to domestic elites

Second, pressures on land are multiple, arising not only from multinational corporations looking for new sites for offshore production, but also from domestic actors. From experiences in Zambia, Kenya, Mozambique and elsewhere, we now understand that there is a continuum of grabs underway, ranging from urban migrants using their wage incomes to acquire or extend their landholdings in their rural home villages, to urban businesspeople. Foreign companies seeking large tracts of land in Africa may not be the most significant form of resource grab underway. Deininger *et al.* (2011) show that in certain countries, including Nigeria and Sudan, the total area acquired by domestic investors exceeds

that acquired by foreigners. Further, several studies suggest that, cumulatively, smaller localised grabs by domestic elites may constitute a more pervasive and significant force transforming agrarian economies than large-scale land grabs (Jayne *et al.*, 2014).

Such findings suggest that attention to large-scale land deals has obscured this. Or to what degree is land grabbing taking place *within* communities and even households, in response to growing pressure on land? This cannot be equated with the large corporate takeovers of community land with official sanction. But it does suggest that growing pressure on, and demand for, land sparks processes of accumulation and concentration at multiple levels. Serwajja (2014) shows this in relation to post-conflict northern Uganda. Smalley *et al.* (2014) show it in relation to sugar outgrowing and its impacts on food production and land conflicts in central Tanzania. Lind and Letai (2010) show how this was the case also in the pastoral drylands of Laikipia in Kenya's Rift Valley. In each case, large-scale investments have involved some displacement of local settlements or, more commonly, cropping or grazing land. But their impact is far greater than this direct displacement, as the enclosure of large concessions had sparked growing competition over land, not only among the existing population, but also with urban elites and others with capital. Such localised processes of land grabbing, set within the wider context of large acquisitions, have been documented for the Great Lakes region by Ansoms *et al.* (2014). They have also been observed more generally in an analysis for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole by Jayne *et al.* (2014).

## From the dispossessed to the beneficiaries of land grabs

Third, not all rural Africans are negatively affected by 'land grabs'. Research has shown the central role being played by local intermediaries and supporters of ambitious 'development' projects that would see external capital injected into poverty-stricken regions (Ariyo and Mortimore, 2012). These include district commissioners and traditional authorities, and also, within already-differentiated rural communities, those with more land to transact and with prospects of being incorporated into commercial joint ventures. Most of these are men (Tsikata and Yaro, 2014). This suggests not only that land grabs precipitate new patterns of accumulation, but also that where commercial investments precipitate profound changes in local economies, local people are differentially incorporated into new production systems. In other words, new class structures emerge, usually involving stark differentiation

between owners of land and capital, on the one hand, and sellers of labour on the other or, more worryingly, those unable to sell their labour – the surplus population (Li, 2011). These new agrarian settings create new labour regimes, with some farmers becoming workers and others being made redundant or moving to the cities, producing a phenomenon that Bernstein (2010) calls 'fragmented classes of labour'. Differentiation among 'host' communities emerges not only along the lines of class, but also gender, generation and ethnicity. So while new investments might bring scarcity for those who lose their land, water and other natural resources, these land deals redistribute scarcity at multiple scales, enabling accumulation among some local actors as well as investors and national governments (White *et al.*, 2012).

Gender is one way of understanding the stark divide between the rights-based discourses that animate the African Union's agencies, and how state authorities actually behave. At the Agricultural Investment, Gender and Land in Africa conference in 2014, the director of Uganda's national investment authority conceded that when investors approach rural communities, they want to speak to rights holders and under Ugandan customs only men are rights holders. He admitted that in boardrooms, when state institutions negotiate with investors, gender equality and the impacts of investment on women were not even part of the agenda. Investors did not see that gender equality was relevant to their commercial goals and the government did not pressure them to do so. Contrary to two African Union and two FAO regulatory frameworks, then, this authority as the main interface between investors and a national government did not register any need to secure women's rights to land or ensure that foreign investors recognise or respect such rights. While wealthier men, in particular, might benefit, the impacts of land deals on women have been scarcely addressed.

## Financialisation: from land for production to land as a financial commodity

Fourth, land and water are being acquired not merely for their productive use, but also for their speculative value as financial commodities, now and into a future rendered even more uncertain in a context of climate change. Financialisation involves converting the natural resources that underpin rural people's livelihoods into financial investment products. As Clapp (2014) observes, while commodity markets and exchanges are nothing new, the process of 'financialisation' unfolding in Africa and elsewhere brings new actors in and around the commodity chain. They are taking bets and making

profits as food and the land and water with which it can be produced are abstracted from their physical form into a financial instrument, with the expectation of growth in derivative markets (Sassen, 2010). This allows financial actors to externalize costs, avoid responsibility, and portray financialisation as the answer to, rather than the cause of, problems in the food system (Clapp, 2014). Yet little is known about the ways in which these new actors operate in Africa. And little is known about the extent to which, even where production is underway, their acquisition of land and water is speculative; they are betting on the growing value of fertile land with available water. The values of such 'fictive commodities' fluctuate not on the basis of production or productivity, but based on perceptions and expectations in a global marketplace.

## Upstream and downstream from the farm: from land grabs to value chain grabs

The context for the land rush in Africa, and why certain countries and regions are targeted, is also the source of ongoing debate. Those who are optimistic that this new investor interest can be channelled in support of agricultural development have emphasised the opportunities for intensification of production and the potential contribution of Africa to meeting rising global demand for food, feed and fuel. This perspective emphasises how Africa is distinct from other developing regions, offering particular opportunities for investment and agricultural intensification because of a relatively low population to land ratio (World Bank, 2009) and 'yield gaps' between productive potential and current output (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011). What is more, unlike Southeast Asia and Latin America, where more than half the investment capital in agriculture comes from within the region, Africa has a low internal investment ratio (UNCTAD, 2014). These contextual factors justify arguments that Africa depends largely on luring external private capital to drive agricultural commercialisation (New Alliance, 2014). This argument, though, tends to obscure the fact that while intra-African investment is low, it is rising rapidly, driven by private companies from the regional powerhouses of Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, each of which has doubled its share of investment in Africa between the periods 2003–2008 to 2009–2013 (UNCTAD, 2014: pp. 38–41). Africa is not only a destination, but a source of major capital investment.

A further complexity in the land grab debate is that many foreign investors seeking to profit from Africa's capacity to grow and consume food are not actually primarily interested in land. Primary production in agriculture is a risky proposition under most conditions and, with increasingly formalised value chains, is not where most profits are to be reaped (Bernstein, 2013). Land may not be that important to agribusiness and other investors. They are more concerned about controlling what is done on it and how this can secure new markets for seed companies and producers of pesticides, fertilisers, tractors and other equipment. They are also concerned about securing the supply for agroprocessors who will produce commodities to be retailed across the continent. Alongside land grabs, we are witnessing a trend of 'supermarketisation' and a 'retail tidal wave of FDI' (foreign direct investment) directed towards developing countries across the globe and particularly in Africa (Weatherspoon and Reardon, 2003). Many African countries are 'supermarketising', a pattern already clearly evident in, for instance, the march of the South African supermarket giant Shoprite, now in more than half of all African countries.

As supermarkets enter new developing markets, Reardon and Gulati (2008) observe, their initial offerings centre on manufactured and processed foods with long shelf lives, but over time they seek to promote fresh foods – fruit, vegetables, dairy and meat. To do so, they establish centralised and formalised procurement systems and impose quality and quantity requirements that exclude small-scale farmers from supply chains. They require instead production at a scale which necessitates mono-cropping and uniform farm produce. In this context, it is not land grabs, but rather the pull of retail, that drives large-scale industrial agriculture. Also suited to producing for such markets are contract farming arrangements involving smallholder outgrowers of sugar, tea, cotton, coffee and other major cash commodities (Little and Watts, 1994; Smalley, 2013; Oya, 2013b). As retail demands supply from smallholders, the new wave of contract farming seems to be replicating many of the problems of prior experiments. These include displacement of food crops (and women's control over land and food), price volatility and over-production relative to processing capacity (Sulle *et al.*, 2014, Smalley *et al.*, 2014).

To understand the 'resource grab' requires understanding the changes in investment and control of the food system upstream and downstream from primary production. Two elements merit particular attention. First is the liberalisation of seed markets and multinational corporations' interests, including their takeovers of seed companies within and for the African market

(ACB, 2014). The United States company DuPont's merger and majority stake in Pannar, the South African seed company, is aimed at conducting research and development in a 'hub in South Africa to develop new seed technology for the region' (UNCTAD, 2014: p. 37). At the same time, at the other end of the value chain is a rapidly expanding consumer market for mass-produced and processed food.

*'Africa has the fastest-growing middle class in the world: according to the African Development Bank, the continent's middle class numbers about 120 million now and will grow to 1.1 billion by 2060. Wal-Mart plans to open 90 new stores across sub-Saharan Africa over the next three years, as it targets growth markets such as Nigeria and Angola.'* (UNCTAD, 2014: p. 17)

On reflection, the initial representations of the 'land grab' in Africa as being an annexation of natural resources by foreign powers to serve their own markets appears inadequate to describe the range of interests involved. This is not a repeat of the first scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century. The grab of natural resources is in part an attempt to address consumption needs in other regions of the world, but it is also driven by speculative opportunities for profits from the rising values of farmland and water, and from growing consumer markets within Africa itself.

## 4

# From land grab to land governance

It is now widely accepted that ‘investments’ in Africa in recent years have amounted to a resource grab, rather than a ‘win-win’ arrangement for all parties. When this began can be traced to the explosion of research and media reports between 2009 and 2011, including reports by the World Bank (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011) and the FAO High-level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (CFS, 2011). These influential reports presented damning evidence of the negative impacts of large-scale land leasing and concessions, giving mainstream credibility to the charge that ‘land grabs’ were underway. But this quickly gave way to a multiplicity of initiatives driven by Northern governments, development agencies and financial institutions – and even corporate investors themselves – to regulate the resource grab rather than to stop or reverse it. In other words, they addressed how to improve the governance of transactions without challenging the direction of change in who controls resources. Premised on narratives of global scarcity and the compelling argument that Africa urgently needed private investment in agriculture to feed itself and the world (Scoones *et al.*, 2014), such initiatives have shifted the terrain of debate away from how to stop the resource grab. Instead, they focus on how to promote land-based investments in a responsible manner and to regulate how land, water and other natural resources are transacted and rights transferred from existing users to new ones.

Key initiatives to regulate large-scale land deals include the African Union’s *Framework and guidelines on land policy in Africa* (AU *et al.*, 2009). This provides broad principles to inform national policymaking, and warned of a ‘second scramble for Africa’. Next came the *Principles for responsible agricultural investment*

*that respect rights, livelihoods and resources* (PRAI) (FAO *et al.* 2010) sponsored by the World Bank, FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and UNCTAD. This set out seven principles with which investors would be expected to comply. More far-reaching was the FAO *Voluntary guidelines for the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of national food security* (VGGT) (FAO, 2012). This referenced binding international law and covenants, while setting out the obligations of both states and private investors. The African Union’s *Guiding principles on large scale land based investments in Africa* (AU *et al.*, 2014), built on its earlier Framework and Guidelines and establishing specific commitments by national states, was signed by Heads of State in April 2014. And most recently, the FAO Committee on World Food Security’s *Principles for responsible investment in agriculture and food systems* (CFS-rai) (FAO, 2014) developed the principles proposed by the World Bank and others, but now linked these to the VGGT and used multilateral processes through the UN to get government buy-in.

The assumption underpinning all these guidelines is that land governance must be strengthened. Some of the frameworks assume that ‘development’ requires that poor people give up their land – subject to compensation, and with some prospect of getting employment in new enterprises. Ideally, also, it is necessary to make sure that poor and vulnerable people do not lose out on growth and are adequately compensated for losing access to land and other natural resources. In this way, specifically in the PRAI, rights to natural resources have been subordinated to what is presented as the ‘greater good’ – capital inflow, rising

output, growth in employment (even at the expense of self-employment) and prospects for foreign exchange earnings. International financial institutions have argued that concerns over land access may matter less if jobs are being created and if people are able to earn higher incomes – a view also promoted by the investors themselves and deployed by financiers, development agencies and African political leaders (UNCTAD and World Bank, 2014).

While the 'land grab' critique was initially successful, the critics within Africa have been somewhat wrong-footed as the terrain has been re-defined. Now, many African governments are discussing how to facilitate the transfer of resource rights in the interests of development, if only poor people would rescind their claims to land, water, forests and other resources. These policy narratives in Africa are clearly evident in statements by African political and industry leaders. When private companies acquire large areas of African land previously held and used by local people, some call this investment and development while others call these resource grabs that strip Africans of the precious natural resources that they rely on for their livelihoods. African governments increasingly straddle these perspectives, invoking nationalist arguments while at the same time conceding that their own citizens will need to be dispossessed in the name of development. The first two African Union *Guiding Principles* demonstrate this tension by embracing a defence of property rights and, at the same time, defining property rights in terms of a right to compensation for dispossession.

*'Principle 1: LSLBI [large-scale land-based investments] respect the existing, customarily-defined rights of local people and communities to land and land-related resources.'*

*'Principle 2: Persons who lose access to or ownership of land and land-related resources and benefits due to LSLBI are awarded compensation that is fair and timely, in compliance with existing national laws and relevant international instruments.'* (AU et al., 2014: p. 1)

What is controversial about large land deals is precisely that authorities transact the land rights protected in principle one, without free, prior and informed consent by customary rights holders – a practice which requires their compensation as in principle two. Indeed, Africa is the centre of 'land grabbing' not because the land is under-utilised (a justification rather than a cause of large-scale land deals), but rather because the entitlements of those who occupy, use or lay claim to it are routinely ignored in established legal codes (Alden

Wily, 2012). Land grabs may often be legal, at least under national law, but this may not mean that they are fair or comply with human rights standards (Kaag and Zoomers, 2014).

The G8's Land Transparency Initiative (LTI) is the main avenue through which G8 countries seek to address problems of land and other resource grabs. Building on precursors in the extractives industry, advocates of the LTI argue that an independent monitoring mechanism would ensure that land and other resource transactions are subject to public scrutiny by bringing together multiple stakeholders at the national level to oversee all major land deals. Civil society organisations, though, have objected that transparency will not stop land grabs, that the G8 has no democratic legitimacy to make decisions about land, food and nutrition, and that the transparency initiative would undermine the multilateral agreement forged by the CFS and embodied in the FAO voluntary guidelines (TNI, 2013). Such critics charge that the LTI would promote an alternative and parallel system to the FAO voluntary guidelines and would separate initiatives to improve land governance in Africa from the global rights framework (FIAN 2013). The critics also contend that it constitutes a means of promoting transnational land investments rather than halting them (TNI, 2013). Despite scoping work to learn from prior transparency initiatives (Locke and Henley, 2013), the LTI has, in practice, remained as a set of proposals not yet put into operation.

Opaque negotiations determine the contracts between governments and investors. The terms of these contracts include the precise area to be acquired, the uses to which the land and other resources can be put, the amount of rent or compensation payable and to whom this should be paid. As Cotula (2011) observes, 'Negotiations usually happen behind closed doors' and the outcomes of the negotiations, as embodied in the contracts, are usually not exposed to public scrutiny or even made available to people who will be directly affected by the deals. The one exception in Africa is Liberia, where the national parliament is required to ratify any large-scale land investment and to publish the contract (Cotula, 2011). However, this may not necessarily constrain governments from allocating large tracts of land, as is evidenced by the Land Matrix's data showing that Liberia has leased out the largest area of all African countries, relative to its size. Apart from the Liberian case, though, behind the closed negotiating doors is a toxic combination of limited negotiating capacity to drive enforceable commitments from investors and equitable distributions of benefits. Also it is alleged that there is widespread corruption in which political leaders, ruling parties and negotiating authorities solicit or receive cash payments or other forms of kickbacks.

## 5

# Back to large-scale private investments: the New Alliance

Along with the efforts to improve land governance there has been a renewed effort to entice private investors into African agriculture. The New Alliance on food security and nutrition, launched 18 May 2012 during the G8 Summit in Washington (White House 2012), sought to 'accelerate responsible investment in African agriculture and lift 50 million people out of poverty by 2022' (McKeon, 2014). This saw six African countries – later expanded to ten – agreeing to implement concessionary reforms to encourage multinational corporations to invest in their farming sectors. They were Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal and Tanzania. In this way, the world's wealthiest nations, who had pledged \$22 billion in budget support to countries with plans to tackle hunger, redirected their energies to getting African states to make concessions for 45 multinational corporations in return for a projected \$3 billion in corporate FDI – a new round of self-imposed and G8-supervised structural adjustment (Forum on Environment and Development 2013).

The New Alliance agenda consists of a wide range of policy reforms to address corporate investors' interests, particularly in the area of seed control and seed markets. This would include governments stopping the distribution of seed to farmers, except in emergencies, so as to secure markets for seed companies (Provost,

2014). Other reforms include ending export bans, for example when Malawi conceded to abandoning all export restrictions except for maize, so as to allow companies to export food crops, even in times of food shortages within the country (Provost, 2014). This represents an abrupt break from the G8 commitment in 2010 to pledge \$22 billion to poor countries that had goods plans to tackle hunger. Rather, the New Alliance represents recognition that public sector funding and strategies are not the defining factors in African agriculture. Much of the future use of natural resources, food production and food provisioning will be left to the private sector, or 'the market' – specifically a restricted number of multinational companies with the backing of the G8, a variety of bilateral donors and private 'philanthrocapitalist' foundations.

At the outset, farmer and civil society organisations responded to the New Alliance with deep mistrust, seeing it as a case of African states pursuing a path of commercialisation by siding with foreign capital against the interests of existing farmers (Holt-Gimenez 2012, Oxfam 2012, War on Want 2012). This joint statement by 15 African peasant organisations challenges the underlying premise of the New Alliance that states need to facilitate private investment from abroad rather than directly supporting their own farmers:

*'Today we are faced with two contrasting aspirations in Sub-Saharan Africa: the desire to regain control of our development and, on the other hand, the temptation of an excessive reliance on external resources... [African governments] should accord the major advantages to the principal investors in agriculture, those who take the risks within the family enterprises, that is, the peasants, and not to urban or foreign sources of capital.'* (ACB *et al.*, 2013)

To appreciate this moment fully in a historical perspective, one needs to trace a complex policy trajectory over the past 50 years at least. Among many African states, this trajectory saw the rise of state-driven developmentalism in the early independence era. This first involved substantial state investment in agriculture and supportive institutions. Then it passed through the debt crisis and structural adjustment in the 1980s and progressed to the stagnation of agricultural development in the 1980s and 1990s. During this latter period the expected growth in private investment in the liberalised sector failed to materialise. Now it has progressed to a revived global investor interest in Africa's land and water. Unlike the first 'scramble for Africa' in the nineteenth century, though, Africa is now not only the source of raw materials, but a market for primary and value-added products. This suggests that the simplistic parallels drawn between the current land rush and its precursors need to be nuanced, in appreciation of the growing disparities and patterns of accumulation that are marked by an expanding middle class and urban consumer sector.

In this context, models of agricultural development and 'modernisation' have been imported. While the New Alliance sees multinational corporations gaining preferential access to African markets through policy concessions supported by G8 countries, several new actors are influencing agricultural development trajectories in Africa. Recent years have seen the emergence of new development partners, along with the importation of agricultural development models from Brazil, China and, to a lesser degree, India and South Africa. While the role of China in African agriculture has often been overplayed and caricatured (Brautigam, 2011), Chinese companies and parastatals continue to be significant as sources of finance and have become key players in the forestry sector, especially through large logging contracts in countries like Gabon and Mozambique (McKenzie, 2006, 2009, Jansson *et al.*, 2009).

Another significant actor in African farming in recent years is Brazil. Brazilian expertise has been introduced in ten countries in Africa, as African states seek to learn from the *Cerrado* model of agricultural colonisation and to elaborate technical capacity for large-scale crop farming and production of biofuels, especially by refining sugar into ethanol, as in Zimbabwe. To provide support, the parastatal agricultural research agency Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária (*Embrapa*) (Brazilian Corporation of Agricultural Research) established several centres in Africa, starting in Ghana and Mozambique (ABC 2011). As well as exporting technical expertise and agro-industrial equipment, Brazil is also exporting a model of development based on state-driven cadres of extension officers promoting large-scale agro-industry. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Mozambique, the main focus of Brazil's African investment. Here colonial histories and agro-ecological similarities (at least as perceived by the World Bank, 2009) combine to forge contemporary partnerships to modernise Mozambican agriculture in 14 districts that constitute the Nacala corridor (Cabral 2013, Chichava *et al.*, 2013). Building on the Japan-Brazil co-operation programme for development of the *Cerrado*, which dates back to 1978, the ProSAVANA programme explicitly seeks to emulate that model of expanding industrial-scale agriculture (ProSAVANA, 2014, Nampula, 2014). Local farmer organisations, though, decry ProSAVANA as a means of dispossessing them of their land and establishing estate farms to supply global markets via the port at Nacala. The farmer organisations argue that the focus on industrial farming will threaten existing farmers, turning them either into wage workers or into a surplus population excluded from new systems of production (UNAC, 2012). They have called instead for the funds dedicated to ProSAVANA to be redirected to the existing Mozambican government programme for family farmers (UNAC, 2012; Nampula, 2014).

Emerging from the New Alliance, then, and from Brazilian and Chinese partnerships are mega-projects focusing on 'corridor' development (Paul and Steinbrecher 2013). One such example is the ProSAVANA project in northern Mozambique, where farmers face displacement from their lands in favour of multinational plans for large-scale production structures for export. Though initiated in 2012, ProSAVANA has made little headway amid resistance from local farmer associations and international bad press. It is now focused on several small pilot projects instead of the grand plans of a 14 million hectare corridor for agricultural commercialisation (UNAC, 2012). In Tanzania, too, the New Alliance has provided the

justification for major investments through a growth corridor – the Southern agricultural growth corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT). This constitutes nearly one third of the country. Here again, contrary to the New Alliance commitment to support local small-scale farmers, the government has earmarked large tracts, amounting to tens of thousands of hectares, to be made available on tender to international private investors (Sulle and Hall, 2013). These high-level public–private partnerships, forged in the name of the New Alliance, entail concessionary provisions for private capital, a stance which critics have characterised as ‘**national states are backing out from active policy making**’ (Working Group, 2013, emphasis in the original). This raises profound questions as to where the locus of decision-making is on the allocation of Africa’s natural resources and what the implications are for African citizens, and farmers in particular, who seek to influence policy.

## 6

# Policy implications and strategic considerations

The 'land grab' in Africa raises profound questions about governance more generally, and the relationships between citizens, governments and private capital. Who is calling the shots and what are the real politics?

The core challenge that now faces national governments in Africa is how to square land governance reforms with investment strategies. Already some improvements are evident, such as the Zambian land policy process (in limbo for more than a decade) being revived with the aim of confirming a national land policy to protect customary and informal tenure. More generally, though, African policy makers and parliamentarians are candid that the combination of self-interest by political parties and individuals, and national growth strategies mitigate against realising the visions of land tenure security in the FAO and African Union guidelines that they have signed up to (SADC Parliamentarian Forum, 2014). Parliamentarians across the continent have agreed that the land and resource grab must be stopped, and that national governments must put in place adequate legal and institutional frameworks to protect existing land and tenure rights. The Pan African Parliament, and its regional bodies representing national parliaments, have committed themselves to 'work for the development of legal frameworks. These frameworks, while attracting investment, ensure the preservation of ecosystems and sustainable development, taking into account local

conditions and the concerns of small-scale farmers, indigenous people and women'. Also the frameworks 'work towards transparency of all investment contracts and treaties, whether with local or foreign investors, by making them available to the public in a timely manner' (SADC Parliamentary Forum, 2014). Yet these visions are yet to become evident in national laws and regulations.

While some have warned of a 'race to the bottom' as African states compete to provide the most concessionary terms for multinational capital to enter into farming and agro-food value chains, the uptake of the New Alliance suggests a more cautious approach. Many countries are retaining protection for their markets, including bans on genetically-modified organisms. How these processes will unfold is not only hard to predict, but is also far from public scrutiny. The New Alliance is now the most powerful and well-resourced intervention in African agriculture, and farmers' associations and social movements opposing corporate-led commercialisation have little insight into how these public-private deals are unfolding. Participation in national land observatories is one opening for activist organisations, but, if it is de-coupled from the substantive issue of the forms of agricultural investment and their effects, this 'land governance' agenda is very thin indeed.

The plethora of international and regional guidelines, frameworks and declarations dedicated to stopping land grabs in Africa may well seem like the most plausible route for farmers' organisations and other civil society groups challenging land and water grabs. But at the national level, such groups exert limited influence. So where should advocacy efforts focus: the UN system, international and donor institutions, the African Union, or national political processes? Experience to date suggests that all of these are forums where farmers' organisations can have some influence, and while these remain important spheres of contestation, they remain limited. As African lobby groups seek to contest the land rush, and to hold governments to account, this may not be the only or even the key area of leverage. Local action backed up by international campaigns may well have greater impact on private sector players, themselves vulnerable to damage to their reputations at home and abroad. Oxfam's Behind the Brands campaign has shown how, by holding multinational beverage companies responsible for land grabs for sugar production, pressure can be exerted down the value chain to rein in the private sector.

Innovations, which could well become points of leverage to strengthen resource rights, include partnerships to register community rights to land that, while not resolving internal configurations of rights and claims, could serve to defend against state leasing. These could be combined with low-cost and participatory forms

of mapping of existing land and other resource uses. Strengthening land rights from below provides a starting point. At the same time, for as long as land leasing continues, partnerships and alliances could potentially cohere in efforts to strengthen African governments' negotiating skills to secure better contracts and leases, learning lessons from the *laissez-faire* terms of the recent land rush. Beyond these possibilities, though, is the more profound question of mounting alternatives to the corporate takeover not only of land and water, but of control over food value chains within Africa and globally. This requires vast intellectual and practical work, and alliances that can gain momentum across urban as well as rural Africa. In support of this, notions of land sovereignty and food sovereignty need to be better specified in theory and practice (Edelman *et al.*, 2014).

In the midst of the debate about farmland investments there is an astonishing lack of attention to rural non-farm economies in the discourse surrounding agricultural commercialisation. The presumption of an ageing farm population and that young people want jobs rather than farm are problematic generalisations (Sumberg *et al.*, 2012). A core issue is whether or not large corporate land acquisitions will enable alternative livelihoods for people living in rural areas, especially for young people who may be locked out of farming livelihoods as family land is lost (Hakizimana, 2014). African governments need to grapple with this issue.

## 7

# Conclusions

The debate concerning the future of farming in Africa centres on the role of corporate agribusiness versus family farmers who farm and produce for themselves and for markets, and already, in large part, feed the continent. The debate often lapses into a polarised 'large versus small farm' dichotomy. This raises the question of how to forge 'inclusive business models' that enable synergies between these sectors that have come to the forefront of debate across the continent. Those who raised the critique that a 'land grab' is underway in Africa won the fight, but, so far, they are losing the battle. The fight was to redefine large-scale acquisitions of land as a 'grab' that, while often legal under national statutes, violates international human rights norms and local people's resource rights. But defining the alternative to dispossession and displacement has been far more complicated. Now the centre of the debate among African states is how to regulate investments so as to produce inclusive paths of development that combine (foreign or domestic) private investment with local populations (Cotula and Leonard 2010). But this debate is moving ahead in the absence of adequate safeguards being in place to defend the rights of the latter.

As argued so forthrightly by Alden Wily (2010) in her aptly titled paper, 'Whose land are you giving away, Mr President?', the dangerous dichotomy of interests (and asymmetry of power) that leads to resource grabs is not primarily between investors and rural Africans, but rather between rural Africans and their own governments. In view of this, the focus of regulatory initiatives over the past five years on large-scale investments and FDI, could be misplaced. This point is underscored further

by evidence of the sheer scale of local-level land grabs, by rural elites, urban elites and state elites (Ansoms *et al.*, 2014). It is also emphasised by the ways in which large-scale land acquisitions are interacting with and aggravating the heightened competition and conflict over land (Jayne *et al.*, 2014). Regulating the entry of large foreign investments cannot in any way substitute for more generalised legal and institutional measures to secure informal and customary rights to land and water, and, more generally, to natural resources as common property. Yet precisely at a time when investors, both foreign and local, seek to gain control of such resources, it is only through political struggle that the existing claims of resource users might be recognised as constituting real property rights. Such struggles may be strengthened when located within broader social movements mobilising for economic justice and for the democratisation of political space. Alliances between rural and urban movements could be definitive.

Securing resource rights through national legislation and realising these in practice through accessible and accountable institutions are the steps needed to give African farmers, most of whom are women, the basis for their own development. But as we have seen, with the slow and as-yet ineffective attempts to develop global and regional regulations to curb land grabs, the struggle for recognition of customary and informal land and resource rights continues for African citizens. The global and Africa-wide efforts at regulation may constitute an asset in such struggles, but outcomes will be determined by the political economies shaping land, agricultural and investment policies at the national level.

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What has happened since the furore broke over the corporate land rush in Africa? Field-based research has exposed new realities that challenge the linear suggestions of a 'grab'. As the process unfolds and our understanding deepens, the single narrative of the 'land grab' fractures into multiple messy elements. New perspectives have emerged, which reinforce the view that such a grab is underway, yet complicate our understanding of who is doing this, why, how, where and with what results. At the same time, a 'governance rush' has seen a proliferation of international frameworks that try to regulate, rather than stop, corporate and elite acquisitions of African land and water.

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