Conflict Factsheet

'Off Shore' Land Acquisitions and their Implications for Fragility

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<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Conflict Locality</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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<td>2005 –ongoing</td>
<td>Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water</td>
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Conflict Summary

This case looks into the recent growth of large-scale land acquisitions which mostly occur in Africa and Asia. The analysis highlights the drivers of this phenomenon, predominantly economic and environmental factors, and describes how large-scale land acquisitions affect local communities, often creating situations of fragility. It also examines the global efforts deployed so far to tackle this issue.
Conflict History

Land grabbing, definition and scope
‘Land grabbing’ is a term which re-emerged on the global stage in the wake of the 2007-2008 food crisis. Land grabbing is commonly defined as the ‘transfer of the right to own or use the land from local communities to foreign investors through large-scale land acquisitions’ (Rulli et al., 2013).

Land-related deals have dramatically increased since 2005, peaking in 2009. Since 2007, some 45 million hectares of land have been acquired, mostly in African and Asian countries. In scale, the phenomenon is considerable, and large-scale land acquisitions often account for a significant part of a country’s territory. Precise evidence is, however, difficult to obtain, as sources often over- or underestimate the deals (White et al., 2012).

Land grabbing involves diverse actors and alliances, mainly governments and companies looking for investment opportunities abroad, but sometimes also in their home country. Local actors are also directly linked to these deals. Local elites often play a significant role by leasing their land and by cooperating with national governments, whilst rural populations and smallholders are frequently disadvantaged (Wolford et al., 2013).

However, it is not necessarily a one-way phenomenon: a country can acquire large land areas abroad whilst being the target of agricultural investments as well (e.g. Sudan and the Philippines) (Rulli et al. 2013). Besides, some land deals tend to involve more parties in ‘triangular projects’, with a country being the target of joint investment projects by, for instance, a multinational company and an outside government (Dauvergne & Neville, 2010; White et al., 2012).

Large scale land acquisitions are not always linked to agricultural purpose. The invisible impetus for many land deals is also connected to the reach for other valuable resources such as water, wood and minerals (The Economist, 2009; Transnational Institute, 2013).

The main drivers of land grabbing

A changing global food market
The 2007-2008 food price shock is regarded as an important driver of the global rush for land. Although large-scale land acquisitions were already prevalent beforehand, the pace and scope of land transactions following the 2007-2008 crisis has been unprecedented (Grain, 2008; The Economist, 2009; White et al., 2012; Rulli et al. 2013). During this period, rising and volatile food prices led to the implementation of protectionist measures in exporting countries such as India, which resulted in a worsening of the crisis. This revealed the vulnerability of import-dependent countries, which lost confidence in the market as a food supplier. They therefore started to develop expansionist strategies to avoid international markets and the uncertainties associated with these markets. Countries including the Gulf States and South Korea, with food requirements well beyond their domestic production capacities, became heavily involved in the...
acquisition of ‘off-shore land’ (White et al., 2012). Changing diets, especially in China and India, as well as increasing quantitative requirements played equally important roles in shifting the volume and type of crops produced, thereby increasing the demand for land (for a more detailed analysis, see ‘Global Food Price Shocks’).

Guardian journalist John Vidal first introduced the term ‘green grabbing’ to characterise ‘the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends’. The UN Rio +20 Conference further promoted the Green Economy by pricing natural assets, giving an additional impetus to the ‘market environmentalism’. Well-intended programmes with environmental purposes (e.g., creation of natural reserves, reforestation projects, etc.) have thus raised the demand for land all around the world (Transnational Institute, 2013; White et al. 2012).

For instance, the growing popularity of biofuels has further increased the global demand for arable surfaces. Increasing and varying fuel prices as well as the dependency on the Gulf States have created insecurity among fuel-importing countries. This ‘assumed energy crisis’ (White et al., 2012), in combination with climate policies has pushed for the introduction of biofuels worldwide. According to the World Bank, the total area devoted to biofuel crops doubled between 2004 and 2008, reaching 36 million hectares. Although almost half of all cultivated crops are located in the USA and in the EU, biofuel production is assumed to impact land use globally through channels such as global crop prices, crop substitution and land conversion (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011).

Whether biofuel production is compatible with food security is the subject of an ongoing debate (see Darby, 2015; Kline et al., 2016; Darby, 2016). However, even when considering that biofuels could have a positive impact on food security in the long term, it is certain that the rush for biofuel production has contributed to the food crisis and the land grabbing phenomenon (Molony and Smith, 2010).

Financial incentives
Land acquisitions in foreign countries can be a cheaper option than in the home country (Rulli et al. 2013). Financial markets contributed to the expansion of land grabbing, especially in the wake of the financial crisis (Grain, 2008; Transnational Institute, 2013). While in search for safe havens during the well-documented market turmoil, forecasts of increasing food insecurity coupled with the availability of cheap plots of land, led financial groups to invest at an unprecedented scale into land. Financial speculation, and the emergence of new markets for land, have therefore been an additional driver of the farmland rush worldwide (White et al., 2012; De Schutter, 2011).

Favourable policies in target countries
Governments often encourage land deals in their own country. As advised by the World Bank, numerous countries have changed their land ownership laws to attract foreign investors. The idea is to improve the productivity of under-exploited lands and to realise economies of scales by replacing small-scale agriculture by large agribusinesses. Inflows of foreign capital are thus welcomed by countries in dire fiscal straits (White et al., 2012; Grain, 2008).

Security implications
Advocating for rural development and for improving rural markets, international organisations such as the United Nations, the FAO and the World Bank promoted large-scale land acquisitions as a way to bring capital in investment-starved and under-developed regions. Nonetheless, land grabbing involves a wide range of social and environmental challenges.

Many countries affected by large-scale land acquisitions have growing populations, causing significant stress over land. Scarcity of land leads to higher levels of landlessness and rural poverty, fuelling grievances that can contribute to political instability and fragility. Affected populations often get involved in protests, sometimes followed by violent repression from authorities (see, for instance: ‘Land Grabbing Conflicts in Cambodia’).

Lack of consultation of the local population along with inadequate compensation of former land users is a recurring feature of large-scale land acquisitions and a frequent cause of tension (Rulli et al. 2013; White et al., 2012). The disregard for local populations is expressed by the fact that acquired land is often claimed to be ‘available’, although it may be used as pasture land or other kind of livelihood basis by indigenous people or local populations. Weak land tenure rights in many grabbed countries significantly facilitate evictions of land users. In privately-owned areas as well, powerful landlords can easily displace rural populations who are often victims of harassment and violent treatment. A study for the European Parliament highlighted human rights’ violations in some land deals (Cotula, 2014). The nature of these deals therefore undermines perceptions of legitimacy across local populations.

Furthermore, large-scale land deals substantially impact water and food security of local populations. Water abstraction, associated with large-scale agricultural projects, has led to further tensions in already water-stressed areas, such as Sudan (Rulli et al. 2013). The Sudanese population, therefore, depends increasingly on international food subsidies and aid, a paradoxical situation in the knowledge that Sudan is a major exporter of food cultivated by large land owners. Sudan is not an isolated case and land grabbing already impacts the food security of other countries (see ‘Land Grabbing and Protests in Ethiopia’). If most of the food produced by a country is meant for export, the risk of social unrest caused by local food scarcity will be considerable. This process transfers the risk from the import-dependent countries to the grabbed countries. Food production can thus be considered a third great wave of outsourcing, after manufacturing in the 1980s and information technology in the 1990s (The Economist, 2009).

Land grabbing also damages the environment through land conversion. Some of the land acquired and cultivated was not used for agriculture before and thus involved deforestation and related land degradation (Rulli et al. 2013). In those cases, biodiversity and land fertility losses can be tremendous.

Resolution Efforts

The growing trend of large-scale land acquisitions has become an international political issue as civil society movements mobilised around this issue. This has been visible on the international agenda, notably at the G8 and G20 meetings, as well as in the World Bank’s goals for development, and has led to the creation of new global governance instruments (Margulis et al., 2013).
Different positions on large-scale land acquisitions

One study analysing the land grabbing debate (Borras, S.M., Franco, J.C. & Wang, C. 2013) identified three political tendencies. The first, close to the position of the World Bank, consists of implementing more regulation to facilitate land deals. Its proponents argue that land investment is desirable, but should be underpinned by better governance, i.e., by ensuring strengthened rights for communities, such as improved rights to land and consultation, as well as more transparency.

The second tendency aims at reducing the negative impacts and maximising the opportunities of these investments, based on the premise that land deals are inevitable and land redistribution policies to develop small-scale farming difficult to achieve. This position, associated with the FAO but also of some governments and civil society groups, calls for similar governance instruments, focusing mostly on how they could benefit affected local people. This ‘win-win’ strategy aims at reconciling the interests from both sides, that is to say the foreign demand for land and the developments needs of the local economy (White et al., 2012).

The third stance advocates for the total cessation of large-scale land deals, arguing that these investments do not bring any social and environmental improvements but simply benefit corporations. Based on similar policy tools oriented towards rolling back land grabbing, this view is supported by many farmers’ associations and civil society movements. The global alliance against land grabbing, the ‘Nyeleni Plan of Action’ was launched this way in 2011 by La Via Campesina (The Transnational Institute, 2013).

These stances compete with each other insofar as they have different interpretations of how to use the similar international governance instruments they propose (i.e., transparency mechanisms, strengthened property rights and community consultation, and environmental standards) (Margulis et al., 2013).

International efforts for a fairer land tenure framework

Several reports and guidelines have been published to address the issue. In 2009, the FAO provided recommendations for all stakeholders to improve investment processes, focusing on Africa. While it emphasized the need for investors to secure investments and contribute to sustainable development gains, it urged governments to make the latter central in decision-making. It highlighted the importance of including civil society via organisations and support groups raising their awareness and providing legal support, and underlined the role of international development agencies as a catalyser for positive change (Cotula et al., 2009).

The World Bank's original position has been widely criticised for its support of the growth of large-scale farms which results in the disappearance or integration of small farms into large agribusinesses. The World Bank later adapted its position by also emphasizing smallholders’ rights. Alongside the UN, the FAO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), it contributed in 2010 to the ‘Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment’ (PRAI), sharing accountable practices for investment (UNCTAD, 2010; The Transnational Institute, 2013).
The World Bank advocates for a modernisation of the land governance procedures in countries affected by grabbing. Its main policy recommendation to governments for improving land tenure security is to implement programmes of systematic land surveying and titling for all forms of land tenure. It has provided about US $2.7 billion in 25 years to support policies in 60 land administration projects (World Bank, 2014). Several local projects are implemented to fight poverty by giving access to land property rights. The Land Governance Assessment Framework, gathering information through participatory tools at local level, was also developed to evaluate land governance and then monitor progress in some countries, mainly in Africa (World Bank, 2012).

The most inclusive reflection to date on land deals and tenure conditions was established by the UN’s Committee on World Food Security in its ‘Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests’ (FAO, 2012). These principles and recommendations are generally considered as a significant step forward in raising awareness on land tenure issues with potential to improve their accountability and monitoring, and to guide policy reforms. They also underline the importance of consultation and participatory tools at the local level to handle investments in a transparent and inclusive manner.

Although some civil society organisations and movements (e.g. The Transnational Institute) harshly criticized the process, the diversity of actors involved in the negotiation process gave high legitimacy to the document and enhanced its political weight, thanks to which some small producers organisations expect to refer to the Guidelines to back their claims (Margulis et al., 2016; Transnational Institute, 2013). Implementation of these guidelines is supported by many organisations, such as the World Bank, UN agencies and from civil society, providing capacity building and financial aid on the ground. The involvement of the G8 further contributes to the dissemination of the Guidelines by creating partnerships and bringing more funds, visibility and awareness at the local level (World Bank, 2014).

Application of governance instruments
Bringing global solutions to land grabbing is complex because land grabbing occurs in different forms and for various reasons in many countries. There is no typical case for land grabbing, and global land governance can, therefore, hardly apply equally to every situation (Margulis et al., 2013).

Besides, although policies that improve land tenure and promote transparency to counter abusive land grabbing have been passed in some countries, effective implementation seldom follows or might not have the expected impact, often due to weak institutions, lacking implementation tools or wrong interpretation. Pressure from grassroots organisations appears to have had an important role so far in balancing the power in favour of affected communities; however, the outcomes of such actions highly depend on the interactions of state and non-state actors for each specific case (Transnational Institute, 2013).

Land grabbing and land rights have increasingly caught local and international civil organisations’ attention. International campaigns to protect local communities affected by large-scale land acquisitions have sometimes proven effective in raising awareness and preventing evictions. In 2014 for instance, the
President of Tanzania abandoned a commercial project after a widely supported petition led by a social justice network opposed the planned eviction of Masai pastoralists from this area (Nelson, 2015).

Raising farmers' rights awareness and supporting them via empowerment programmes can, to some extent, protect communities from land grabbing, and support local development. By having better access to clear information on their rights, resources and available support, farmers can act proactively and attempt to secure their land rights before their land is seized by investors (USAID, 2013; Knight, 2016). Successful cases of farmers’ empowerment have been documented in Zimbabwe and Cameroon. Initiatives and policies supported by governments, such as land redistribution and agroforestry programmes, have strengthened local communities through enhanced rights, strengthened local governance and cooperation, thus improving livelihoods, creating jobs and increasing food production (Nanga, 2015).

**Intensities & Influences**

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**Resolution Success**

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<td>The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.</td>
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Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Social inclusion & empowerment

Strengthening property rights and promoting transparency and accountability can help reduce farmers' vulnerability to forceful evictions. Programmes of systematic land surveying and titling are already under way in certain countries, combined with participatory tools to evaluate land governance and monitor progress. Further including civil society in decision making about large land deals will prevent abusive practices by governments and investors. To this effect farmers need to be well-informed about their rights and supported in asserting them.

Promoting social change

International campaigns to protect local communities affected by land grabbing deals have sometimes proven effective in raising awareness and preventing evictions.

Resources and Materials

Conflict References
Global Food Price Shocks
Land Grabbing and Protests in Ethiopia
Land Grabbing Conflicts in Cambodia

References with URL
Knight, R. (2016). How to Help Communities Protect their Lands. [Accessed July 18, 2016]
USAID. (2013). Land tenure and property rights overlay.

References without URL

Further information
https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/global-land-grabbing