

THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF GLOBAL LAND DEALS: LAND AND LABOUR NEXUS IN GHANA

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ISS, The Hague

Abstract

The past decade has seen a tremendous amount of literature on the impacts of the global land rush. Much of the debates have been rooted in theoretical and analytical perspectives that speak particularly to the land question, with little emphasis on labour. Yet, support for large-scale agricultural investments in Africa is largely premised on their labour prospects for local economic development. However, despite earlier calls by some critical scholars to centre labour in the land grabs debate, labour is generally invisible in both mainstream policy and academic research. Following through an example from rural communities affected by an oil palm land deal on Ghana's eastern corridor, which is characterised by migrants, settlers and sharecroppers, this thesis examines the land grab-labour nexus. The central research question is: *how does corporate large-scale farmland deals impact labour relations, and what are its implications for rural politics and labour governance?* The study is situated within a broad agrarian political economy framework. Between 2018 and 2020, primary data was gathered through a mixed-method approach and in a four-phased field visit, spanning a total of six months.

The study shows how land grab processes are directly linked to the complex dynamics of dispossession as powerful actors within the intersecting spheres of state, chieftaincy, family and farming institutions capitalise on the sudden commoditisation of land to control and exclude certain groups of people from land entitlements and other material resources that accompany large-scale land acquisitions. The existing rent distribution process, which has also become a pseudo land tenure formalisation instrument, has immense implications for intergenerational land access for people with lineal and derived rights, communal and fragmented landholders, and labouring classes and other social groups. Generally, women, youth and sharecroppers bear the brunt of land losses. Throwing light on labour contributes to a better understanding of the complexity of land grab-related impacts, especially one that presents a broader picture of a socially differentiated peasant communities, and thereby the varying benefits from land resources that a dispossession-centric framework may not be able to capture fully.

This study contributes to the emerging but still thin body of knowledge on contemporary land rush that underscore the issues of labour prospects and gender disparities of plantation agriculture. Not only are employment opportunities minimal, but the precarious working conditions characterised by casualisation, low incomes, indebtedness, and poor occupational health and safety are also a reminder of how and why capital's need to maintain its own reproduction does not cohere with purported social contributions from land deals. The gendered disparities in incomes also reinforce and widen the existing inequalities between men and women. At the same time, farmers and farmworkers, ardent to maintain their subsistence culture continue to produce staple food crops in spite of the competing demands for residual lands, and the division of labour between own farms and the plantation. The evidence of the labour competition between own farms and the plantation does not conform to any particular pattern partly because of the differences in household demographics/family labour availability, land access, farm locations, the types of crops farmed, the seasonality of oil palm harvest and the casual nature of the plantation work. Nonetheless, there is a general perception indicating a decline in the yields and diversity of their own food production, and difficulties in maintaining their own farms, with women being significantly affected.

Furthermore, placing peasants' political reactions within the context of contemporary land grabs presents rural politics on two broad fronts. On the one hand, against dispossession, and on the other hand, against labour exploitation and for better terms of incorporation. In a context of relative land abundance, where land grabbing has not entirely disrupted the existing subsistence ethic, political reactions from the affected landholding families have been generally covert, contained and reactionary, and farmworkers' everyday politics through absenteeism, non-compliance, and the continuance of their own food production enable them to maintain their basic food sovereignty/security. Yet, considering the fragile livelihood situations of these remote communities, a corporate 'investment' discourse still override a land grab narrative; demands are directed more towards rents and labour than land reclamation, and farmworkers' multiple and individualised everyday politics do not necessarily change the structure of social relations associated with capitalist agriculture. The main connecting string to land- labour nexus of land grab politics is the question of food. This is closely linked to the global food sovereignty narrative, or to bring it home to Ghana, a kind of local food self-sufficiency whereby almost all affected groups prefer that their food security is derived mainly from their own production and a satisfactory utility of their produce instead of food purchases. This reaffirms the importance of land access for farmers and farm workers, even if land deals create employment and generate income. Nonetheless, there are several points where interests diverge and compete on the grounds of social class, identity and generational differences.

Finally, the study demonstrates that the problems of peasant farming and rural agricultural wage labour are not unconnected. Still, rural wage workers raise particular issues that, unfortunately, have fallen to the margins of both mainstream regulatory strategies that promote 'responsible' farmland investments, and radical anti-land grab civil society groups, including the food sovereignty movement dedicated to campaigns against the threats of land dispossession. On the one hand, from a policy perspective, there are many legislative gaps in the governance of agricultural wage labour. In Ghana, there are not appropriate labour institutions to protect agricultural workers, and the few existent either maintain the status quo or even repressive. Investors, therefore continue to operate under laissez-faire business environments, prioritising their economic viability often to the detriment of marginalised groups. It is essential to have agriculture-specific legislations that deal with labour issues on both large and small-scale farms. For regulations to be effective, the rights of agricultural workers need to be secure. At the same time, statutory provisions for unionisation must be supported by policies and programmes that build the capacities of these hard to organise casual workers. If any large-scale investment is to be justified, the 'why' question from the perspectives of landowners and those attracted to wage labour should not be ignored. Peasants move in out of seasonal poverty, and desperation forces them to them make constrained choices regarding land transfers, as well as inhibit their agency on capitalist large-scale farms. There is the need to address discriminatory agricultural sector policies that leave some small-scale farmers with very few alternatives. Effective investment and labour regulations should also reflect the contested spaces of unemployment, underemployment, rural-urban inequalities, the challenges of small-scale agriculture, fragile livelihoods and power relations within which these investments are expected to take place. On the other hand, if food sovereignty is to realise its potential power as a counter-narrative to neoliberalism, and as a possible democratic alternative for working people with differentiated and sometimes, competing socio-economic interests, then demands that adequately reflect the diverse agrarian struggles of the rural working people have to be put onto the agenda and engaged better than it is now.