# Book Review Symposium Introduction: The Transnational Land Rush in Africa

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Following the triple crisis of 2007/08 (food, fuel, finance) there was a spike in foreign investor contracts acquiring land across the world, but particularly in Africa. The long durée of land rush reminds us that this is not new. Rather, it is one of several waves each of which leaves legacies. The Transnational Land Rush in Africa collection highlights that lands grabbed during the colonial period are still held in private, largely foreign, hands. Country case studies in the book also highlight how the structural adjustment programs imposed on the continent spurred another rush. The Land Matrix documents that tens of millions of hectares of lands have been involved in contracts and failures, with indications that this represents only a portion of the deals made, primarily the larger, foreign ones. The newest Land Matrix report reaffirms the findings presented in the country case studies in the book: in the aggregate, the land rush has exploited people and the environments they live in. Where we differ is

that while the Land Matrix report seeks to make these deals ‘better’, we find that voluntary guidelines enable a lack of accountability, and conversely that many international and intergovernmental actors have facilitated and protected these investments. The last decade of evidence shows us that playing our hopes on positive ‘spillovers’ and requests for greater smallholder inclusion are unrealistic. In The Transnational Land Rush in Africa, a key issue that contributors focused on is resistance and activism, which presents an alternative narrative to others that have framed the land rush around the concerns of governments and investors.

This symposium opens up our book to examination, reflections and critical perspectives from experts such as Lorenzo Cotula, Nisrin Elamin, Wegayehu Fitawek and Kariuki Kirigia. As shown in their contributions, these discussants offer a depth of knowledge as well as passion for orienting people before profit. Our brief survey of the contributions begins with Nisrin Elamin, as she draws our attention to the history that often goes untold. We then turn to Lorenzo Cotula, who offers reflections on his long-term engagement with this area of research and activism, and the changing contours of the terrain. His contribution is followed by Kariuki Kirigia and Wegayehu Fitawek, who respectively focus on the issues covered in Sections I (The Land-Development Nexus) and III (Formalization, Domestic Agency and Legacies of Legal Pluralism) of the book.

In her contribution, Nisrin Elamin begins by reflecting on how the transnational land rush in Africa is often seen as a wave that hit the continent during the triple crises of 2008 – a perception which often pits powerful transnational ‘grabbers’ against dispossessed locals. While such ‘conflict of opposites’ may be useful in some respects, she insists that it romanticizes and de-historicizes social wider social relations that have governed land tenure while also overlooking the important roles played by a variety of local stakeholders such as pastoralists, agricultural workers, local government officials, domestic investors, NGO leaders and union organizers. In this regard, Elamin considers our book as making a useful contribution in placing local stakeholders at the centre of the analysis. Highlighting the manifestations of land grabbing at this scale is important because it also reveals how domestic actors are neither homogenous nor unified in their stance on or stake in these large-scale land acquisitions. Such emphasis also deconstructs the simplistic (even Eurocentric)

assumption that locals impacted by land grabs are powerless. As Kirigia also notes in his contribution, there are many examples of local protests and resistance that have sought to undermine the preponderance of land grabbing in places such as Cameroon, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Senegal.

Elamin raises several important questions that those of us interested in the transnational land rush in Africa should care about, including 1) how are processes of land dispossession driven by the rush for African land gendered, classed and racialized?; and 2) how do ongoing and historically layered processes of extraction shape the environments of marginalized communities? among others questions that are meant to situate the phenomenon within both its *longue durée* history and its contextual social differentiation. In fact, social differentiation is a key element we see as something that future research should explore. If we include other crucial areas such as climate change, it becomes important to ask what is beyond the land rush and what the future of the continent looks like judging from the myriad climate-induced challenges and other converging pressures on the continent's socio-economic, environmental and political milieu.

In his contribution, Lorenzo Cotula reflects on his long-term research and engagement on the land rush. We note that his contributions have included authoring some of the most influential books and reports on the topic, which have been widely cited. In agreement with the contributors to the book as well as to this symposium, Cotula points out that the recent land rush was only one step in a longer-term process of dispossession, with large-scale land holdings having origins in colonial periods as well as during the structural adjustment era, re-orienting the narrative away from one of markets (food, fuel, finance) and toward one of long-term exploitation. From The Transnational Land Rush in Africa, Cotula draws indications of a general failure of the promises of development via large-scale agricultural investment, with positive outcomes appearing uncommon and unlikely - which, he notes, advance the unintended negative impacts of disruption, displacement, and conflict. Cotula concludes with a note on new realms of legal research, integrating local governance and tenure, transnational contracts, and international investment frameworks. He identifies how laws operating within unfettered capitalist systems enable and protect exploitation but optimistically views opportunities in the legal realm as well for activism and resistance

The contribution by Kariuki Kirigia focuses on the first part of the book, which falls under the theme “The Land-Development Nexus: Grand Discourses, Social Injustice and Contestations.” The chapters that fall under this cover cases such as Cameroon, Senegal, South Sudan and Nigeria. Despite the different historical and political trajectories of these four countries, Kirigia finds in his review that they share a common feature that underpin the “complex intertwinement” of local communities, the state, and foreign investors in land grabbing. This complexity also reveals how land grabbing, while considered as a relatively ‘new’ phenomenon, represents the continuity of the continent’s colonial history in some respects. In fact, the chapters covered by Kirigia point to how land grabbing is not merely something perpetrated solely by foreign investors but the state, through private-indirect governance, plays a proactive role in making deals that are usually not in the interest of its citizens. Kirigia notes the growing ability of locals and grassroots movements in places such as to mobilize and resist the persistent capitalist expansion on the African continent. We believe that if these movements become widespread and sustained, they would represent an important voice for many vulnerable and marginalized groups who often have to individually deal with the livelihood ramifications of land grabbing.

Similar to the other contributors, Wegayehu take us to the 2007/08 drivers of the recent land rush, with changes in the US and China as well as to commodity prices and demands for biofuels impacting land across the continent. On this point, the narrative is in alignment with the broader discourse. Where Wegayehu draws our attention is domestic agency, which tends to be made invisible in narratives that are oriented around investors and global capital. Wegayehu focuses on two country case studies, within Part III of The Transnational Land Rush in Africa, entitled Formalization, Domestic Agency and Legacies of Legal Pluralism. The cases that drew her attention are those of Ethiopia and DR Congo, both of which highlight history (land tenure in Ethiopia, colonialism in DR Congo) as essential issues for inclusion in this discourse. Notably, these aspects could be made invisible if one starts the discussion with the triple crisis in 2007/08.

The book this symposium addresses is one of several works that were produced with the support of a SSRHC research grant. Our objective in compiling this volume was to assemble case studies and insights that underscore the

complexity of the transnational land rush in Africa as well as its continuities and discontinuities. It appears to us that while so much has changed, several things also remain the same. Understanding this back-and-forth movement is important to explaining the intertwined manifestations of globalization, capitalism, imperialism, Eurocentrism, racism, extractivism, and in fact, many other isms in the affairs of the African continent and its people. It is unclear what the future holds but one thing that can be postulated is a future where these processes explain the state of the continent and the outcomes of a myriad mechanisms of intervention and resistance operating at various scales.

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