Book Review: The Transnational Land Rush in Africa: A Decade After the Spike

By:

Wegayehu Fitawek

November 19, 2021

After the 2007/2008 food and fuel crises, land acquisitions have increased alarmingly up to 2014. According to Land Matrix 2021 Report, fewer land deals have been concluded since 2015. This might be because of normal price expectations, conflict, and several countries restricted the selling of land to foreign investors. The global food crisis was one of the key drivers of the global land rush, in food-importing countries with land and water constraints (such as the Gulf States), in countries with large populations (such as China, South Korea and India) as well as in the countries targeted for investment (developing countries) to address poverty through export commodities. Despite biofuel production failures in most African countries, finding alternative energy sources to meet the growing global fuel demand was another global land rush driver. In 2016, biofuel production occupied 43% of Africa land deals compared with 50% crop production. The land tenure system is directly related to the land rush in Africa. Countries such as Cambodia, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Laos and Ghana are some of the countries characterized by weak land tenure security and have received more large-scale investments (Nolte *et al*., 2016).

Beyond the global land rush, little research has been done on the intention of the investments, the size of the deals, negotiation and implementation status of the deals, even though the host government still promotes new investments. This is due to the lack of transparent data and the range of metrics utilized, such as land available, land committed and land leased. Most of the previous research focused on the impact of active investments. Although many investments signed contracts and entered the production phase, a substantial number of deals are still not operating or failed, 50% of all failed investments found in sub-Saharan Africa. Little research has investigated the cause and the current owner of the land after the project failed. For example, Madagascar was one of the top ten targeted Africa countries in 2016, while currently, only a few deals are active. Countries such as Gabon, Congo, Sudan, Morocco and Zambia have leased massive contracts held by a few actors and some of the deals are failed, yet little research have been done in those countries.

This essay reviews the book co-edited by Logan Cochrane and Nathan Andrews, The Transnational Land Rush in Africa: A Decade After the Spike. The book has three parts, in addition to the introduction and concluding chapter. The first part, Part I contain four chapters under the theme, The Land-Development Nexus: Grand Discourses, Social Injustice and Contestations. The second part, Part II encompass three chapter under Informality and ‘New’ Customary Land Tenure Landscapes theme. The third part, Part III contain two chapters under the Formalization, Domestic Agency and Legacies of Legal Pluralism theme. This review focuses on the book's third part, which includes studies from Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Chapter 9 in the book is co-edited by Melisew Dejene and Logan Cochrane on the title “The Power of Policy and the Entrenchment of Inequalities in Ethiopia: Reframing Agency in the Global Land Rush”. The first section introduces and describes the global land rush and Ethiopia as one of the targeted continents. The second section of the chapter discusses how the past three Ethiopian government regimes have viewed commercial agriculture as a strategy for improving national food security and economic development. As a result, foreign investment in the agricultural sector rapidly increased in Ethiopia after

2000, before the commodity price spike. Dejene and Cochrane document how Ethiopia's government promoted foreign investment by offering attractive packages to investors, including low annual land lease rates, income tax exemptions for years, access to financing, and guarantees for the full repatriation of capital and profits duty-free imports. The result was the foreign investment in broad areas, from producing cut flowers, to biofuels, oilseeds, cereals and vegetables. The authors also mentioned that many kinds of research had been conducted on the impact of large-scale land acquisitions and ‘land grabbing’ in Ethiopia after the commodity price spike of 2008.

The Ethiopia case study also explains the data challenge on the global land rush. The contribution used secondary data from the Land Matrix from the period of 2000–2018. Looking to history, the authors outline that the land reform enabling large-scale acquisitions is connected to the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which led to a major change in land reform during military government (1974–1991). This reform enabled the majority of the country’s citizens to access land, but also nationalized the land and eliminated private holdings. The government that followed (EPRDF, 1991-2019) maintained land as state property, codified in the constitution that was approved in 1995. The government revised the size of the deals in 2008 and the type of crop production in 2012. Dejene and Cochrane found that the prominent foreign investors in Ethiopia originated from India, Saudi Arabia and the EU (in terms of land holdings). Although Ethiopia experienced peaks in levels of land leasing in 2007, 2010 and 2012, the rush effectively ended in 2013 following the introduction of regulatory reforms, which placed new restrictions on foreign investment.

The next chapter in Part III is Chapter 10, written by Chris Huggins, titled “Overlaps, Overestimates and Oversights: Understanding Domestic and Foreign Factors in the Land Rush in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”. This chapter mainly focused on the land and investment laws, policies and institutions of the DRC. Like the previous chapter, this chapter also started with a brief introduction and outlines that the DRC was also one of the main targeted countries in Africa during the early ‘global land rush’ period of 2008 and 2011. In 2010, almost 48 percent of the total agricultural land was leased (11 million hectares). Out of this, more than 70 percent of the land leased was held by South African companies. However, the study shows that the global land rush in the DRC was smaller in scale than initially reported. Huggins review some of the aspects of the land tenure legal systems, including the general Property Law of 1973, the 2006 Constitution, Conseil Agricole Rural de Gestion (CARG), The 2011 Agricultural Law, Forestry Legislation and Land Law and Policy Reform. These provide insight into the legal and governance aspects of the land rush in DRC.

Huggins' case study on DRC reviews four different case studies representing land acquisition by multinational companies participating in oil palm production, mining, forestry and agricultural products. The study advocated the importance of cooperation between different stakeholders; the need to cultivate a high level of political will to tackle land grabbing; the need to support the land rights of local communities; the importance of funding decentralized institutions that can monitor and regulate land grabbing by foreign and domestic actors; and changing discourses around land and agriculture to move away from a simplistic 'modernization' argument that justifies the land rush.

As a collection on the land rush in Africa, the book compared and contrasted various case studies from most regions in Africa and examined large-scale land acquisition related topics that contribute to filling the gap in the current literature on the land rush and its impact. Most of the previous studies focused on the impact of foreign investment on large-scale agricultural land; however, this book also attempted to investigate the impact of large-scale domestic investments. Many available pieces of works of literature mentioned that Africa's land rush started after the 2007/2008 commodity prices spike. However, this book shows that the land rush began before the spike. In addition to evaluating the trends and impact of a land rush in Africa, the book explains what is expected beyond the land rush. For instance, the authors estimated the impact of COVID 19 on Africa foreign investment by suggesting that COVID 19 might result in a drop in foreign investment because of nationalization and regionalization emerging from disrupted global supply chains.

View online: Book Review: The Transnational Land Rush in Africa: A Decade After the Spike