

Chapter 5

Exploring the Food Security Strategy and Scarcity Arguments in Land Grabbing in Africa: Its Ethical Implications

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary studies surrounding the land grabbing phenomenon in Africa have revealed two findings. First, the purchase or lease of vast tracts of land from poor, developing countries by wealthier, food-insecure nations has raised deep ethical concern over food security and rural agricultural development. Second, there is the existence of a powerful myth that large-scale land deals are necessary in order to deal with scarcity. Drawing upon extensive contemporary literature on foreign land acquisition and food security, this chapter examines the phenomenon using “rent gap” theory. With an insight provided into understanding the independent layers of land grabbing in Africa, a criterion on what should constitute appropriate procedure for land acquisition is thus supplied. Findings posit that despite insufficiency of food availability in Africa, land grabbing continues regardless of its social and ecological limitations. This chapter has a significant implication for cumulative research on the subject of ethics of foreign land acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

The convergence of contemporary global crises such as financial, environmental, energy, and food in recent years has contributed to a dramatic reevaluation of the status quo, and rush to control

land, particularly land located in the global South especially Africa (Borras & Franco, 2010). Despite insufficiency of food availability in Africa, the past decade has witnessed an enormous increase in large scale land acquisitions, on a permanent or long-term basis, in developing countries espe-

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cially Africa for the purpose of export agriculture, biofuels production, and foresting for carbon mitigation, with acquisitions made mainly by national governments or corporations based in the wealthier, more developed countries of the world (De Schutter, 2010). This phenomenon labeled by scholars and activists as ‘land grabbing’ is certainly considered an emerging, prominent factor in the explosion of global commercial land transactions revolving around the production and sale of food, alternative energy (especially biofuels), mineral deposits and reservoirs of environmental services. (Borras, Franco & Wang, 2013).

Consequently, lands that hitherto seemed of little or no interest to the outside world are now sought by international investors from China, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Malaysia, Mexico, France and Germany as well as private investors from the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) to the tune of hundreds of thousands of hectares. This development directly threatens the food security and of persons in the target countries by closing off agricultural land that was previously used by small farmers or pastoralists for subsistence or domestic food production (De Schutter, 2011). In many countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Mali, and Sudan where food insecurity is already high, large percentages of the total arable land have been sold or leased to foreign investors (GRAIN, 2012).

It is pertinent to note that throughout history, food had been identified as a contributing factor of countless upheavals. This lends credence to the assertion that the greatest threat to our common future “is no longer conflict between heavily armed superpowers, but rather the spreading food shortages and rising food prices with its attendant political turmoil” (Bernstein, 2013: 19). Against this backdrop, many global analysts have predicted that the biggest security threats in the twenty-first century may likely center on disputes over food and water that the Earth’s dwindling water supply is able to produce. However, the emergence of this new trajectory popularly known as “land

grabbing”, or “large scale land acquisition” which connotes the purchase or long term lease of vast tracts of land from mostly poor, developing countries by wealthier, food-insecure nations as well as private entities to produce food for export, has raised deep concern over food security and rural agricultural development. Agriculturally, farmland acquisition for the purpose of acquiring food is not a completely new phenomenon (Bourne, 2009). Several things about the new fashion are nonetheless new. In the past, foreign farming investment and transaction was usually private. That is, private investors bought lands from private owners. In recent time, however, majority of the new land deals are government to government or foreign investors to governments. The sellers are often times the host governments dispensing lands they technically claim ownership. The other side of the argument is the scale of acquisition (Bourne, 2009). Previously, the biggest land deal will be around 100,000 hectares as against the present day land deals which goes for several hundreds of thousands of hectares. In the same vein, unlike the older project which centered on cash crops such as coffee, tea, sugar and bananas, the current transaction typically centers attention on staples or/and biofuels such as wheat, maize, rice and beans (Castree, 2003).

Even though foreign countries have been involved in agricultural activities in Africa for many years before, the scale of the business has of late been dramatically enlarged. Development actors across the world have viewed large scale land acquisitions (LSLAs), in less developed countries with mixed feelings and reactions. While some see it as a major threat to the livelihoods of the local rural poor and rural agricultural development. Others see it differently and simply as economic opportunity for local communities that could benefit from the income generated from the leasing or selling of the land (Jama & Gonzalo, 2008). Today however, industrial agricultural projects implemented on these ‘grabbed’ lands also involve intensive use of water, thus depriving

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