

Chapter 15

Land Deals, Dispossession, and the Threat to Peasant Livelihood in Northern Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The chapter discusses how the security of communal lands tenureship and the livelihood choices that such land entitlements confer on peasants in northern Ghana are being undermined by new forms of land deals. This is done against a background unlike the past. Northern Ghana is witnessing an influx of transnational organizations that are interested in establishing jatropha plantations as biofuel feedstock. The implications of direct land deals between traditional leaders and transnational corporations, which invariably involve large tracts of land and the livelihoods of the peasantry, is a matter of interest in this work. The vulnerability of traditional leaders caused by their weak institutional capacity and poverty push them to enter into agreements that they do not understand. The chapter examines both sides of the debate pertaining to the outcomes of the land transactions on livelihoods in light of the poverty in northern Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

The publication by Nyari (2008) 'Biofuel and Land Grabbing in northern Ghana' and the IRIN news report of 9 September, 2009 captioned 'Land Grab Force Hundreds off Lands' were to draw attention to a new form of land transactions in northern Ghana in which their traditional rulers, just as it is becoming the trend elsewhere in the

country were now dealing directly with transnational corporations, to meet the latter's demand for large land tracts for agriculture. The publications also revealed that dozens of peasant farmers were dispossessed of lands without recourse; and were thereby deprived of their sources of livelihood which customary land entitlements had provided them (Nyari, 2008; IRIN, 2009; Action Aid, 2012; Bugri, 2012). The concerns that were raised

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about the implications of land dispossession in rural communities, evoked strong sentiments as some described this development as a land grab (Action Aid, 2014).

A profusion of intellectual discourses was generated, in consequence, to discuss the implications of these land deals on the livelihoods of the people in the affected communities (Nyari, 2009; Tsikata & Yaro, 2011; Akwensivie, 2014; Boamah, 2014). However, the accounts provided by many tend to be blunt and generic about the Ghanaian situation as they proceed on the assumption that there is a monolithic customary land tenure system in the country (see Boamah, 2014). Our seminal concern, in this chapter, is to draw attention to the particularities of land tenure systems in northern Ghana; and to discuss the implications of the new forms of land deals on the predominantly peasant communities of the guinea savannah ecological zone.

The global economic crisis of 2007/2008 has caused movements of global finance capital out of the metropolitan centers to new destinations in the emerging economies of Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia, for a more secured and profitable economic engagements (Boamah, 2014; Osabuohien, 2014). This search for new investment destinations especially as it relates to the establishment of large scale plantations for biofuel feedstock and food agriculture, have ineluctably brought the peasant communities into an uncomfortable embrace with transnational capital. The imperative of economies of scale for large commercial capital-driven cultivations, which in turn require large scale land appropriations have resulted into land dispossessions of the indigenous peoples (Action Aid, 2012).

The mediascape in Ghana have therefore been inundated with reports of unfair land transactions between transnational corporations and traditional rulers in rural communities of the country, with a deracinating effect on the indigenes' primordial customary land holdings (Boamah, 2011; Akwensivie, 2014). The role of traditional leaders in these

land transactions with transnational corporations, especially the weak capacity of the latter to deal effectively with the more sophisticated multi-state business actors featured in the discourses that emerged (Tsikata & Yaro, 2011; Bugri, 2012).

The emerging situation in northern Ghana is actually part of a global trend of land deals in which unsuspecting peoples in various parts of the developing world are outwitted and deprived of large parcels of land (Gan et al., 2011). The term 'land grabbing' has often been used in the land deals debate to denote 'unfair practices' perpetrated by investors on unsuspecting indigenous people (FAO, 2012). But what really constitutes 'unfairness' in the land deals debate is not a settled matter. This has thus generated differences in the conception of what constitutes land grabbing.

Cotula et al (2009) for instance posit that land grabbing occurs when there is a large scale land acquisitions that are above 1000 hectares. It is however indicated by Graziano da Silva (2009) that not "every large scale acquisitions or lease of land should be considered as 'land grab.' He indicated that there are a number of benchmark considerations that should be analyzed; among which are the needs, and rights, of the poor and vulnerable rural families, particularly smallholders, who are the main food producers in several countries. These benchmarks are more or less reiterated in the definition provided in the Tirana Declaration (Land Coalition, 2011). In this declaration land grabbing is conceptualized as land acquisitions or concessions that are characterized by one or more of the following:

1. Violation of human rights, particularly the equal rights of women;
2. Not based on free, prior and informed consent of the affected land-users;
3. Not based on a thorough assessment, or are in disregard of social, economic and environmental impacts, including the way they are gendered;

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