



The Great African Land Grab? Agricultural Investments and the Global Food System

A Book Review

By Robin Palmer



In an African Arguments brief in January 2011, I wondered ‘why, given that the long-term impact of global land grabbing on many African rural communities could well be catastrophic, does there appear to exist an almost total conspiracy of silence on the subject?’. But I added, ‘I sense that this may at last be beginning to change a little.’ Thankfully my

sense has proved well-founded. There is now almost an avalanche of material, most recently the hugely impressive Journal of Peasant Studies collection (40, 3, 2013) on global land grabbing methodology, while I recently reviewed a manuscript entitled ‘The global land grab: beyond the hype’ and was asked to review another called ‘Everyday forms of land-grabbing in the Great Lakes Region of Africa’.

In this context we now have Lorenzo Cotula’s outstanding new book which will, without any doubt, make a major contribution to this growing literature on the subject. In an arena that is often polarised, it is supremely fair and balanced. It unpicks and unpacks things, based on the author’s extensive research and practical experience. In what is now both a very fast moving and highly complex field with many actors, Cotula guides us scrupulously and well, calmly and dispassionately.

The author has visited and re-visited the places he writes about, and this shows. He makes particularly effective use of introductory scene settings – ‘in Massingir’ etc., and also of some of the meetings he has attended – with investors, with African farmers, the FAO etc. Choosing Africa as a broad focus makes good sense, and it also makes excellent sense to narrow down and draw examples from the four countries which he and his IIED colleagues have researched in the past – Ghana, Mali, Mozambique and Tanzania.

Cotula begins:

This book is a journey through the growing body of evidence. The ambition is to offer an academically rigorous

yet accessible reader on an issue that has attracted growing attention not only among professionals, but also in public opinion at large. (p. 5)

He concludes:

There is a role for research to challenge these accepted ‘truths’, to provide a deeper and more fine-grained understanding of the unfolding social transformations, and to document what models of agricultural investment work for inclusive sustainable development. (p. 192)

I strongly believe that he has succeeded in both of these admirable aims. He makes the important, but frequently overlooked, point that:

local nationals, not foreign governments or transnational corporations, are at the forefront of the land rush...Where foreign investment is involved, Western companies and firms from within the African continent account for the lion’s share of the deals. (p. 10)

and also that:

the land rush is not about feeding the planet. It is mainly about meeting demand for energy and consumption goods in richer countries and about speculation linked to rising land values. Fuel, wood, fibre and finance, more than food, are the engines of the renewed interest in agricultural investments in the global South. (p. 11)

In Chapter 2 he rightly stresses the need for an historical approach, which is all too often forgotten, and which is something I also bang on about, for the colonial past does indeed ‘cast a dark shadow on the present’ (p. 20).

Cotula is also not afraid of complexity – ‘there are multiple rural worlds in Africa’s countryside’ (p. 30), while ‘the deals will tend to produce differentiated outcomes – with some groups being better placed to capture the benefits or at least partake in the crumbs, and others losing out’ (p. 33). This is critically important.

Chapter 3 effectively unpacks 'the scale, geography and drivers of the land rush' and stresses that 'transnational land deals for plantation agriculture are not happening in a vacuum' (p. 47), mentioning demographic growth coupled with pressures from mining, petroleum and conservation.

He rightly observes that 'knowing who is behind the deals and what motivates them is critical' because 'without that understanding, it is very difficult to develop effective responses' (p.52). Also that 'The involvement of national elites in the rush for land is perhaps the single most important reason for the pervasive lack of transparency surrounding the deals' (p. 54).

He is also excellent at pointing out the exaggerated claims relating to the involvement of China and the Gulf states.

Cotula's fine analysis of the reasons why the arguments for large-scale agriculture are winning the day concludes sombrely:

much depends on whether governments are prepared to take the actions needed to reverse the incentives that favour large-scale farming. The problem is that there is no political will to do this. In fact, many African governments have embraced the shift to large-scale farming, and are making land available to agribusiness on favourable terms. Policies in recipient countries, not just global market forces, have favoured the land rush. (p. 81)

Chapter 4, on land grabbing in the shadow of the law, is particularly valuable. It is a complex theme which the author usefully unpacks for the benefit of the lay reader.

There is a good section about attempts to strengthen the protection of customary rights, in which IIED researchers were prominent, which reaches the sad conclusion:

On paper, this recent wave of law reforms has gone a long way towards strengthening local control over Africa's land. But in practice, it has had relatively little impact. (p. 91)

Later we have this depressing, but I fear realistic, assessment:

in most African countries, land is mainly used as a vehicle for extracting value...In this context, attracting foreign capital provides national elites with opportunities for business activities, political patronage and personal gain. (pp. 100-1)

On international law, we have yet another bleak conclusion:

In the global rush for Africa's land, prevailing legal frameworks make local rights vulnerable to dispossession, and provide only limited opportunities for villagers to defend their rights. Once a piece of land becomes of outside interest, legal options for local people to defend their rights, negotiate a fair deal and hold governments

and companies to account are severely constrained, not only by entrenched power imbalances, but also by the weak rights that villagers have under both national and international law. (p. 120)

Chapter 5, on winners and losers, is also excellent, challenging many more simplistic analyses and digging deeply into the complexities of African rural worlds. He concludes that 'Overall, evidence from different parts of Africa suggest that the negatives tend to outweigh the positives' (pp. 138-9), 'The benefits of employment generation in the land deals appear to have been greatly overstated' (p. 140), and 'Growing numbers of villagers in Africa are experiencing the stark contrast between the bold promises and the wrecked livelihoods that large land deals can bring' (p. 141). Sadly, 'Success stories are still hard to come by' (p. 142) and 'The best evidence available to date suggests that, at the local level, large land deals for agricultural investments tend to be bad news for local people' (p. 145).

But he also notes that:

Social differentiation among and within groups means that communities are often divided about an investment project, which can result in patterns of both opposition and cooperation. Also, local responses to a large land deal are mediated by pre-existing tensions about land and authority. (p. 146)

Water is increasingly recognised to be a critical component in the land grabbing phenomenon and Cotula illustrates this well in a section of Chapter 5, while adding that:

Land deals cannot be viewed in isolation. They are part and parcel of wider social and economic transformations that are changing the face of many parts of the continent. (p.157)

In Cotula's conclusion I liked the point about our 'determination to reduce our carbon footprint without fundamentally questioning our consumption patterns' (p. 174). But sadly there are few votes to be won on a reduce consumption ticket! There is this sombre conclusion:

small-scale rural producers, who have thus far provided the backbone of African agriculture, risk being marginalized by the transition to larger-scale agriculture, out-competed by large farms in control over land, labour and government support. The livelihoods, ways of life and culture of millions of people in Africa are at risk. (p. 179)

I found his comments about farm size both judicious and helpful; one size clearly does not fit all and we do indeed need 'a more nuanced analysis'. He is not afraid to argue that many young people in Africa today want out of farming and that their parents often make sacrifices to provide an education which will help them achieve this.

He rightly stresses the complete failures of governance and the 'widespread sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement among those affected by the deals' (p. 182).

Though the author tries hard to be cautiously optimistic, I fear that few of the changes he calls for are politically feasible, e.g. a change in power relations, greater transparency, more bottom-up approaches, legal empowerment of local

landholders, rethinking national and international legal frameworks and the presumption of state ownership of land, and a better deal from incoming investment for African countries.

As he concludes:

African agriculture is at a crossroads. Decisions taken now will have major repercussions for the livelihoods of many, for decades to come.' (p. 192)

