



Africa's Land Rush: Rural Livelihoods and Agrarian Change

Hall, Ruth, Ian Scoones and Dzodzi Tsikata (eds).

James Currey: Suffolk and Rochester NY, 2015. 204 pp.

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This book is a compilation of a series of disconcerting case studies on the transnational 'land grabs' gripping the African continent as a result of the collaboration and self-serving interests of direct foreign investment and the local elites in affected communities. It chronicles the challenges and discontents arising from large scale land acquisition deals in the African continent and their impact on land governance and sustenance of livelihoods.

The title of the book clearly captures its main premise by showing that no sufficient assessments were conducted in most African land deals before they were concluded, hence they represented nothing significant other than 'Africa's land rush'. The problematic nature of this approach is that the livelihoods of the poor and the marginalized are threatened and undermined in favour of the interests of big businesses and multinational corporations who are driven by profit making. The book shows that land acquisition should not be taken lightly as a transaction between the buyer and the seller.

This process will lead to access not only to the land but useful community shared resources such as water, firewood, medicinal plants, thatch and others, which are critical for the survival of ordinary people. The challenge resulting from these land deals is that communities are often forced to change their livelihoods from food to cash crops which mainly benefit investors (in the form of cheap land, credits and other concessions). It is clear from the cases that land acquisitions have the potential of threatening food security and leading to the feminization of poverty as the cultivation of some commercial crops (i.e. sugar cane) do not necessarily benefit women.

The authors challenge the status quo by arguing strongly against the accepted myth that foreign direct investment in large scale agriculture would result in technology transfer and the improvement of the lives of ordinary people. They are not mincing their words in pointing out that although land deals may appear perfect at face value, they have, however, left a trail of untold suffering in most African countries. Under commercialized land deals, land is no longer a resource that can be enjoyed and shared by the community but a commodity for the advancement of private interests and restricts opportunities for local communities. It has been a common practice among investors to take advantage of unregistered customary

interests given their fluctuating and insecure circumstances. The book shows that dispossessions, loss of biodiversity, degradation and conflict are some of the disturbing outcomes emanating from these unprotected land based agreements/contracts. Just in case some readers think that land grabs are mainly an outside job, the case studies reveal that traditional leaders, politicians and the state itself are often implicated as collaborators with 'land grabbers' in exchange for monetary benefits.

The fascinating aspect about this book is that it offers a wide range of cases from which one can richly draw policy lessons, especially for African governments across the continents. Although case studies are drawn from a plethora of African countries, it would have been even more interesting to consider including detailed studies from countries such as Zimbabwe and South Africa. Given the backlogs on land redistribution in our country, South Africa can draw useful lessons from these cases in terms of ensuring that citizens do not end up being 'passive beneficiaries of development' or 'victims of dispossession'. Major projects in mining and the agricultural sector are underway across our country and the African continent, hence it remains a valuable source of reference to guide our understanding of challenges that emanate from land based investments. [NA](#)