# GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

# Understanding Land Deals in Limbo in Africa: A Focus on Actors, Processes, and Relationships

Land, as the material and symbolic foundation of agrarian life, is situated at the heart of African studies.[1] Debates over land access and control have grown in salience and urgency in recent years in the context of large-scale land acquisitions. In the wake of the global food, fuel, and financial crises of 2007–2008, an unusual and heterogeneous group of actors—including foreign and national governments, private corporations, as well as individual and institutional investors—joined the rush for land in the global South to produce and/or to speculate on agricultural commodities (GRAIN 2008; Borras et al. 2011; Fairbairn 2020). The speed and scale of this land rush were extraordinary. Prior to 2008, the average rate of agricultural land expansion was less than four million hectares per annum worldwide; in just one year, between 2008 and 2009, foreign investors had expressed interest in approximately 56 million hectares of farmland globally, of which 70 percent was reportedly concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa (Deininger et al. 2011).

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Though most investments thus far have focused on agriculture, land deals across Africa have also been signed for onshore mineral, oil, and gas extraction; forestry; conservation; tourism; renewable energy; and other industrial purposes (Cotula 2013; Land Matrix 2021).

Despite the surge in land deals, implementation has been slow and uncertain. Numerous projects initiated within the last two decades, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, remain stalled, partially operational, abandoned, or speculative to date. This is not an unexpected pattern. In fact, the first major transnational land deal that commanded public attention in 2008—the South Korean Daewoo Corporation's acquisition of 1.3 million hectares of farmland in Madagascar (one third of the country's arable land)—collapsed before it could take off, due to social unrest and domestic politicking (Burnod et al. 2013). Among the projects Klaus Deininger et al. (2011) examined in their World Bank report, only 21 percent had begun farming, often on a limited scale. Cultivation rates have not improved over time, particularly in Africa. A recent study estimates that, of approximately 22 million hectares investors contracted for agriculture in the region between 2000 and 2014, only about 0.7 million hectares (3 percent of the total area) were under production (Johansson et al. 2016).

In light of this trend, researchers and activists have begun calling attention to the nature, causes, and implications of these "failed land deals" (Schönweger & Messerli 2015; GRAIN 2018; Gagné 2019; Persson 2019; Nolte 2020). However, the parameters of what counts as "failure," and for whom, are often more ambiguous than straightforward (Chung 2020; Kamski 2019; Schlimmer 2020). To the extent that land acquisitions vary considerably in their trajectories and outcomes, this forum asks: through what actors, processes, and relationships do land deals become stalled or partially implemented, and with what consequences for the various parties involved? More than ten years after the onset of the global land rush, critical reflection and analysis is needed to foster a better understanding of the social and political dynamics of what we call "land deals in limbo" in Africa. This intervention is important not only for advancing theory but also for informing policy debates around the future of land investments, agrarian reform, and rural development at large.

Through long-term, in-depth ethnographic research, the articles in this forum show the fluidity and indeterminacy of recent land deals in Zambia, Senegal, and Tanzania. While these studies are empirically grounded in the realities of specific countries and field sites, the themes emerging from the articles reflect broader regional and global trends that may be relevant for and applicable to other settings. The three countries under study are heterogeneous in their social, political, and economic systems; but they are similar in that they have been key targets of investors in the first decade of the land rush, while also being sites of numerous stalled or incomplete land deals (Deininger et al. 2011; Land Matrix 2021). Comparing different countries across the continent is necessary in order to identify patterns and variations in the way contemporary land ventures are governed and experienced. Within-country case comparisons, such as the two cases from different regions of Senegal featured in this forum, also highlight how government responses to investments can vary based on local and regional historical specificities.

In their article, Tijo Salverda and Chewe Nkonde trace the reasons for the partial implementation of a European agricultural land deal in Zambia. They argue that the investors' inability to assemble the necessary land titles, deepening financial challenges, and land disputes with local residents have prevented the company from meeting its intended goals and fully cultivating the land. Marie Gagné explains how a controversial and poorly performing agribusiness company in Senegal has managed to (re)gain land control, albeit precariously. She documents how the company has continually adapted its "repertoire of control" to obtain land, convince the central state to authorize and re-authorize the project, and exert power over local communities. Ashley Fent focuses on protracted negotiations for a small-scale heavy mineral sands mine in Casamance, Senegal. She shows how uncertainty enabled various project opponents and proponents to use "scaling" as a strategy to politicize and depoliticize the spatial extent and potential impacts of the extractive investment. Youjin Chung examines a lawsuit lodged by three male elders in Tanzania against the government and a foreign investor who intended to establish a sugarcane plantation there. She shows that while the elders' gendered "lawfare" succeeded in temporarily halting the land deal, the exclusive and opaque nature of the litigation process deepened existing social inequalities. In the following paragraphs, we outline the forum's key themes and contributions to the literature.

## The land question: control and governance

First, the forum emphasizes that *de jure* land acquisition does not automatically translate to *de facto* control over land due to complex issues of governance. Even when states have promised or formally transferred land to investors, these investors still face the challenge of taking effective possession of the land and using it as they intended. Ambiguities in land administration and competing land claims have led to situations in which investors have not been able to "render land investible" (Li 2014) or even make it "legible" to themselves (Millar 2016). The example Salverda and Nkonde offer is a case in point. They demonstrate how a European company in Zambia's Central Province struggled to assemble 180 separate title deeds to create a 38,000-hectare block farm; of these titles, the investor was only able to convert 72 in their own name, resulting in partial development of the land (a mere 2 percent of the entire concession was irrigated for farming in 2018). Gagné's article also shows that governments can assign investors concessions situated within or adjacent to protected areas, resulting in contestation with villagers over resource access (see also Chung 2019), and the allocated land may not be suitable for the particular materiality of the crops involved (see also Moreda 2017; Schönweger & Messerli 2015).

To secure control of the land they acquired, investors must build and maintain their relationship with host governments, but this process is often more tenuous than assured. Even those investors who have obtained initial state support must continuously engage in legal and extra-legal work to "hold on" to the acquired land (Peluso & Lund 2011). Gagné highlights this by delineating the multiple "claim-making performances" a company has adopted in Senegal, such as promising socio-economic development, aligning its business mission with changing government priorities, and engaging in public relations efforts to legitimize its land deal. Yet, all of this discursive work can be difficult for companies to sustain. Investors also face the persistent risk of host governments arbitrarily revoking their land titles or cancelling projects, as evidenced in Mozambique, Madagascar, Senegal, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, among others (Nhantumbo & Salomão 2010; Burnod et al. 2013; Gagné 2019; Chung 2020; Dejene & Cochrane 2021).

National states are confronted with their own set of challenges in governing land deals, including the need to reconcile the often contradictory task of furthering capital accumulation while preserving their political legitimacy and maintaining social stability (Chung 2019; Gagné & Fent 2021; Hunsberger et al. 2014). As a result, they can play an ambivalent role in producing land deals in limbo. In their respective articles, Fent and Gagné illustrate the Senegalese state's efforts to defuse, or at least contain, local opposition to two different land deals, despite its expressed commitment to promoting private investments in the agricultural and mining sectors. In both cases, the state facilitated the signing of memorandums of understanding with local populations, although it treaded much more carefully in Casamance, given the region's troubled past and ongoing aspirations for independence. Hence, states are often compelled to remain sensitive to public opposition to land deals for the sake of their legitimacy, although more research is needed to understand the sometimes conflicting motivations and inconsistencies behind government decisions.

## The resistance question

Our second related argument is that resistance matters for understanding the divergent and unexpected ways in which land deals unfold. Ultimately, one of the most persistent challenges investors face in attempting to exercise exclusive rights to land is the presence of local residents who depend on the land, forests, and waters for their livelihoods. Whereas force may be used to effect land clearance and dispossession, this is an unpopular choice by investors concerned about their reputation as "responsible" companies, as public opposition can compromise their social license to operate and delay project implementations (see articles by Gagné and Salverda & Nkonde). Uncertainties surrounding the future of land deals can also create opportunities for people, whether local residents, landless migrants, or elites, to occupy "idle" land concessions or even sell plots within them, which can further complicate companies' attempts to control land and populations (see articles by Chung and Salverda & Nkonde). The complexity of local politics combined with companies' own managerial limitations may, thus, render land a "burden" for investors, as Salverda and Nkonde call it, rather than a productive or speculative "asset."

In examining community responses to land deals, it is important to recognize that the boundaries between resistance, acquiescence, and incorporation are blurry (Hall et al. 2015). Just as states and investors are active agents or partners in land investments (Wolford et al. 2013), local people, too, are political agents in their own right. Their responses to land deals, like those of states, can shift over time, as political economic conditions change, and as those changes reshape the character and objectives of the proposed investments. Investors can deflect dissent by co-opting project opponents and securing consent from smaller groups of powerful actors, including those who may not directly reside within the project areas but may have influence over local politics (see articles by Gagné and Fent). On the contrary, when companies do not deliver on their promises, people who initially endorsed land deals can change their positions.

While highlighting the importance of subaltern agency, the contributions by Chung and Fent both offer a measured analysis of the limitations and contradictions of what might otherwise be termed resistance "from below." In examining a lawsuit three male elders filed against the Tanzanian government and a foreign investor who intended to establish a sugar plantation, Chung shows that what appeared to be rightful resistance was in fact highly exclusionary and suspect in nature. While the elders professed to act on behalf of over five hundred villagers, they excluded from the lawsuit hundreds of other legitimate resource users across gender, class, generation, and social status; the majority of their co-plaintiffs and even their lawyer also turned out to be urban elites with ties to industry opponents to the sugar deal. In her analysis of local resistance to a 185-hectare mineral sands mining project in Senegal, Fent highlights how various project opponents, including members of the regional separatist group MFDC (Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance), mobilized scalar narratives and drew on longer histories of conflict to stretch the eventual extent and potential adverse consequences of the project to "all of Casamance." Yet, the opponents' discursive reference to the "unity" of the Casamançais concealed ongoing problems of political and social erasure, cooptation, and fragmentation in the region.

Both articles caution against simple narratives of virtuous grassroots resistance and highlight that there is no single "local community," but rather communities with complex internal divisions and differentiations. Communities are often split in their support for and opposition to land deals, but divisions may also exist within those groups, based on individual motivations and resources. In sum, the politics of difference at the local level merits serious scrutiny as it could, arguably, limit the possibilities of more sustained collective action against land grabbing and silence the voices of less powerful groups.

## The capital question

Finally, the forum argues that frictions and contradictions within capitalism itself impose limits on the expansion of resource frontiers. Capital is not a thing, but rather a set of relationships (between and within investors, corporations, nation states, domestic elites, shareholders, laborers, lenders, donors, etc.). As in the past, there is a discrepancy between what capitalists and states seek to accomplish and what they are practically able to achieve on the ground (Ferguson 1990; Scott 1998; Li 2007). Current land deals often represent a continuation of, or a variation on, previous inconclusive attempts at "development," whereby states repurpose land that had not been successfully exploited, such as for mineral extractions and white settler farms in colonial Zambia (see article by Salverda & Nkonde), a parastatal ranch in Tanzania (see article by Chung), and agroindustrial schemes and tourist facilities in Senegal (see article by Fent). This discrepancy between dreams and reality in the context of contemporary land deals is also shaped by various internal managerial constraints, such as the misappropriation of funds by corporate executives (see article by Gagné) and unrealistic aspirations by investors (see article by Salverda & Nkonde). In these agribusiness ventures in Senegal and Zambia, financial problems played an important role in preventing companies from realizing their promises of community betterment and national economic development.

This leads us to consider the inherent risks, financial or otherwise, involved in capital-intensive "greenfield" projects. Despite the promises of millions of dollars of capital outlays for their planned projects, investors often do not come with cash in hand (Li 2014). Investors must assemble equity and loans and raise enough funds from not only commercial banks and national development banks but also international financial institutions, which often come with many conditions, due diligence processes, and risk-underwriting requirements (Engström & Hadju 2019). Companies listed on the stock exchange also face shareholders' expectations for short-term returns, whereas agricultural profitability over vast expanses requires time and patience (see article by Salverda & Nkonde). Investors must further be prepared to withstand the volatility of the global commodity market, and for agricultural ventures in particular, various material, ecological, and temporal obstacles to production, such as the unpredictability of weather and pests, the perishability of commodities, varying seasonal labor requirements, and other logistical challenges (Mann & Dickinson 1978; Cotula 2013; Schönweger & Messerli 2015). Whereas investors might experience poor yields due to lack of rainfall as in Zambia (see article by Salverda & Nkonde), in other cases, such as in Ethiopia, too much rainfall and flash floods have led to project closures (Gill 2016). Advancements in technology have reduced some of these weather-related risks, and novel financial instruments have enabled speculators to make gains despite these uncertainties (Fairbairn 2020), but unresolved challenges concerning land governance and local politics limit the potential for capital accumulation. Although mining and other extractive ventures are less susceptible to environmental vagaries and less dependent on labor than are agricultural investments, Fent's article shows that these projects, too, can be subject to delays and obstructions. Agricultural and extractive projects, therefore, may not always provide easy fixes to contemporary capitalist crises (Gagné & Fent 2021).

## Conclusion: Why should we care about land deals in limbo?

The literature on the "global land grab" and the "new enclosures," including this collection, compels us to revisit the classic agrarian question that asks whether and how capital takes hold of agriculture and the countryside (Kautsky 1988 [1899]). The popular belief that investors come to Africa, pillage land and resources, dispossess rural people, and start producing for profit is, in most cases, too simplistic a narrative. Even projects that appeared to have all the right ingredients for "success" have not been able to accumulate capital. We might ask, then, what are the unintended consequences of capital's inability to transform rural landscapes? Who gains and who loses from land deals that remain unfunded, unimplemented, or unprofitable?

The mechanisms of corporate land acquisition and control, coupled with the ideas of development and progress that undergird all of the cases examined in the forum, bring into sharp relief the enduring coloniality of power. The different actors, processes, and relationships involved in making, remaking, and unmaking contemporary land deals are rooted in, and reproduce, structural asymmetries of power. The "liminality" of land deals (Chung 2020) can enable host states to consolidate and expand their power in the countryside (Moreda 2017; Kamski 2019; Schlimmer 2020). As this forum demonstrates, even when projects do not generate profits, they can also allow (white) foreign corporate actors to assert their authority over local populations, replicating racialized patterns of dispossession. Stalled land deals can also create opportunities for private gain for some local actors, including male elites within the affected communities.

As critical scholars concerned with social justice, we must acknowledge the disproportionate risks incomplete land deals can impose on rural populations who are fighting to remain on the land. These deals can still severely limit land access for existing resource users. They can displace people or put them at risk of being displaced with limited or without compensation. They can intensify local inequalities, tensions, and conflicts. Even when land deals collapse completely, governments do not necessarily return the land to its prior occupants (Cotula 2013; GRAIN 2018). Whereas land acquisitions might be a part of a larger story of neoliberal globalization, they are deeply embedded in rural people's historical struggles for livelihoods, identity, belonging, and dignity. As the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, reports of companies and elites seizing land and policymakers fast-tracking legislative reforms to facilitate land acquisitions are on the rise (Szoke-Burke 2020; Cotula 2020). Regardless of what direction they might take, the stakes of land deals in Africa and globally are, thus, too high to ignore.

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## Note

1. See for example, the 2017 Forum on Land Disputes and Displacement in Post-conflict Africa in this Journal.