

Book Reviews

Lorenzo Cotula (2013), *The Great African Land Grab?: Agricultural Investments and the Global Food System*, London, New York: Zed Books, ISBN 9781780324203, 248 pp.

Over the past few years, the hotly debated issue of so-called “land-grabbing” has resulted in a great number of reports and academic studies. *The Great African Land Grab?: Agricultural Investments and the Global Food System* is “a journey through that evidence” (5) that aims to be both accessible and academically rigorous. Given the vast amount of evidence on land deals in sub-Saharan Africa, this is an ambitious task, one that Cotula discharges successfully: He provides a comprehensive account of land deals in Africa while keeping an objective stance in an emotional debate. By drawing on the evidence of others and his own extensive field research in Ghana, Mali, Mozambique and Tanzania, he produces a book interspersed with anecdotes that provide the reader with a sense of being directly on the spot, whether at large international conferences where land deals are discussed or amid displaced farmers in rural Africa.

The book revolves around four sets of arguments. First, Cotula sheds light on the historical roots of the land rush. He analyses how the European Scramble for Africa has left scars that continue to influence Africa’s position in the global market and its land administration even today. He then looks into state-led land acquisitions after independence and into more recent trends of agricultural intensification and land-grabbing from below. Second, the book concentrates on scale, geography and drivers of the land rush. Estimates of scale vary widely, as scarcity of reliable data and the fast-evolving situation hamper accuracy. Generally, the scale is overestimated in public perceptions: There is a large gap between actual and reported deals, and between the land areas covered by transactions and those upon which projects are implemented. Much attention has been focused on foreign investors, while in reality local nationals lead the African land rush. Where foreign investors are involved, it is Western investors that are the most prominent, despite media attention on investors from China and emerging economies. The widespread perception that agriculture is a profitable business drives the land rush, and is underpinned by the narrative of rising demand for food and biofuels and the move toward large-scale production.

Third, Cotula scrutinizes the role law plays in the rush for land. He shows why governments facilitate land deals, how national laws make people vulnerable to dispossession, and how international laws developed at two

speeds – international trade and investment law developed fast, international human rights law lags in terms of effective implementation. Fourth, the book sheds light on socio-economic impacts of land deals. Despite a growing body of evidence, much will become evident only in coming years as the full impacts come into play long after project implementation. Overall, land deals are bad news for local communities as they disrupt livelihoods – for example, through loss of land, which is not offset through the agricultural venture. Benefits – for instance, distribution of revenue flows or job creation – are not equally distributed across communities: Those that lose access to land are not necessarily those that gain; local and national elites are most likely to do so. Where deals fail, land is lost to communities but nothing is gained from the deal. However, not only local communities are affected, since the cumulative impact of land acquisitions is far-reaching. For instance, these deals can have profound implications for water use that not only disadvantage local farmers but reverberate downstream. The cumulative impact of projects can play an important role in transforming economies and societies and the global food system. However, it is too early to estimate the full impact with certainty.

Cotula concludes that the land rush reflects profound social transformations. While historical trajectories (Chapter 2), political economies (Chapter 3) and legal frameworks (Chapter 4) shape socio-economic outcomes (Chapter 5), these socio-economic outcomes, in turn, reverberate, for example, the implementation of deals that further remove control from local people. Thus there is a growing need for a democratization of the process: Participation should involve a bottom-up approach, and more inclusive models of agricultural investment are needed. Here, Cotula sheds his neutral tone and appeals directly to the reader, writing that “the time is ripe for African countries to benefit from incoming investments” and “it is time for the aspirations of rural people to [take] center stage in the decision-making processes that shape the future of Africa’s agriculture” (190).

The book successfully takes stock of the knowledge of land deals in Africa that has accumulated over recent years. It is rich in empirical material and successfully illustrates complex processes. Knowledge gaps are freely admitted. While the different chapters aligned with the four sets of arguments structure the debate, Cotula succeeds in showing the interconnectedness of all these issues. The assessment of land acquisitions in Africa remains balanced throughout the book.

However, Chapter 4 on socio-economic outcomes promises more than it can deliver – and at the same time does too much. Even though Cotula admits at various points that it is too early to determine outcomes at the local, national or even global level, the longest chapter of the book (47

pages) leaves the reader searching for answers. The first part of the chapter is an assessment of negative and positive outcomes for local communities, but remains rather vague. While the reader may be left wondering why only short-term impacts such as displacements and compensations are considered, the chapter opens with very broad strokes: the cumulative impacts of land deals on society and economy at large. It is of great importance that authors highlight the far-reaching consequences of such land deals, but this part of Cotula's analysis remains speculative for the most part and features many very specific examples that cannot be generalized. One wonders whether a simple distinction between short- and long-term outcomes might clarify the line of argument and make it easier for the reader to follow.

Overall, the book enriches the debate on "land grabs" in Africa by providing a most comprehensive and balanced overview of an emotional and vast debate. It succeeds in bringing structure to the debate while at the same time showing how complex and interrelated the processes surrounding land deals are. It is thus a must-read for those seeking an introduction to the issue of land-grabbing as well as for scholars working in the field.

- Kerstin Nolte