

CELADA Outcomes Document

Panel Discussion on Equitable Alternatives and Local Solutions to Land Grabs in Africa

Convened March 24, 2015 -- University of Ottawa: 120 University Private, FSS 4007

The Coalition for Equitable Land Acquisitions and Development in Africa (CELADA) organized a panel discussion at the University of Ottawa on the topic of Alternatives to Land Grabs in Africa. The objective of the discussion was to go beyond criticizing land-grabs to identifying alternative agricultural strategies that support and improve the livelihoods of African farmers who are typically at risk in land takeovers. After introductory remarks by CELADA Chair and Senior Fellow at the University of Ottawa's School of International Development and Global Studies (SIDGS), Roy Culpeper, a panel discussion was moderated by CBC news anchor Adrian Harewood. There were five panelists: Annie Brunton (SIDGS graduate student); Faris Ahmed (USC Canada); Samuel Bonti-Ankomah (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada); Joshua Ramisch (University of Ottawa), and Blair Rutherford (Carleton University). There was also a lively discussion with comments and questions from audience participants.

The following is a summary of key outcomes of the discussion.

1. The framing of African populations as passive victims in land grab practices is problematic as it fails to recognize the various forms of agency, resistance, informal coping mechanisms, and involvement of national and sub-national actors in these processes. Attending to such dynamic social forces provides important counter-narratives to what has become a hegemonic and somewhat simplified narrative of "foreign investors grabbing land from Africans".
2. Greater attention must be given to domestic politics and power dynamics for better understanding the consequences of land grabs. Voices belonging to affected "communities" do not necessarily speak in unison as monolithic entities, nor do they act according to the same values or are motivated by compatible incentives. There are typically divisions based on gender, class, tribal or ethnic affiliations. Local politicians and elites, rather than foreign investors, are often implicated in land-grabs. Moreover, it is important to note that land is valued for social and cultural, as well as economic, reasons. Unpacking these complexities helps reveal which parties are included and excluded from land access and utilization.
3. Differentiating between types of land investment (public, private, productive, speculative, large-, small-scale) is crucial. Smallholders continue to undertake the bulk (70%) of land investments globally, putting into perspective the role played by foreign stakeholders in overall agricultural investment. Moreover it is worth noting 80% of food is produced for national markets.
4. In a similar vein, while contemporary globalization facilitates the commoditization of land, water, and biomass both through profit-making initiatives and conservation efforts such "earth grabs" are not new. They also occurred in the colonial and post-colonial

histories of many African states. Today, “green grabs” for carbon sequestration can also be problematic for local peasants and forest-dwellers.

5. The potential of burgeoning movements oriented to food sovereignty was noted as a means to confront land grabs and other agricultural strategies that reduce food security. Such movements have resulted in the enshrinement of the principle of “free, prior and informed consent” by resident communities to acquisition of their traditional lands. Consideration of inclusive co-management schemes respecting the land stewardship of local agro-pastoral producers is required to reconfigure current food production and supply chains.

6. The ambiguous benefits of land acquisitions and investments were presumed to be largely overrated and are based on flawed assumptions that capital inputs translate into rural transformation. The export market penetration associated with some land grabs cannot alone generate sustainable or equitable development outcomes. In general, access to foreign markets can be problematic—export markets have been associated with the export of natural resources from Africa and the accumulation of wealth elsewhere. Also, land acquisitions often do not create local employment, for example when foreign investors bring in their own workers.

7. Relatedly, rigorous research by national, African, and international organizations on what constitutes practical, sustainable food systems is much needed as a point of departure for equitable outcomes. Researching such systems will undoubtedly require capacity building through investments in human and institutional capital.

8. External actors (foreign investors or states contemplating land acquisitions in Africa) are susceptible to overlooking the cultural connotations of land for African farmers and its significance for their livelihoods. The formalization of land ownership, via land titling and property rights, viewed as a means to reduce the adverse impacts of land grabs, was viewed with some skepticism, as formal land rights are alien to most farming areas in Africa, where customary rights to lands communally held has been the pattern prevailing for many generations.

9. Regardless of investor intentions, it is a serious concern that land investments typically take place on a non-transparent basis in host states. ‘Success stories’ in this regard are exceptions to the rule, indicative of the absence of open, participatory and consultative processes. In this context, dismantling of the state and state capacity under previous or ongoing economic reforms has had negative consequences.

10. Agrarian development in general faces an uncertain trajectory as it competes with rapid trends of urbanization with pull factors attracting younger generations into cities and away from traditional livelihoods in rural settings. Similarly uncertain are the implications of demographic shifts on a continent where agricultural activity has long been the cornerstone for many economies. Reconciling the challenges of development and the need for rural innovation in Africa will be crucial to address food security and food sovereignty in the region. There is also a need to reframe the demand for “agrarian reform”. Equitable outcomes will require land redistribution in favour of smallholders, as examples from Latin America have shown.