



Land versus livelihoods: Community perspectives on dispossession and marginalization in Ghana's mining sector

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ABSTRACT

Globally, land has significant socio-economic value since it is a major source of livelihood for people who use it for farming. Yet, mineral mining is reducing people's access to their land. This paper employs the global land grabbing literature to examine the political economy of land dispossession in Ghana's mining sector, with a focus on the activities of two multinational companies. The argument is that is that the dispossession that occurs due to the proliferation of mineral extraction undermines the potential contribution of mining to sustainable livelihood outcomes for people in host communities. To augment this argument, the paper draws upon primary data gathered using two methods namely, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in addition to a plethora of secondary sources, on the community perspectives on dispossession and marginalization relative to land and livelihoods in Ghana's mining sector. Drawing upon such data, the paper also underscores the intersections of place (global and local) and agency (domestic and foreign) with the overall objective of using the case of Ghana to underscore how land dispossession remains an important driver of social injustice, marginalization, and poor livelihoods in mining communities.

1. Introduction

Land struggles in Africa have persisted for decades, if not centuries. Contemporary struggles over land, however, are driven by novel crises in fuel, food, and finance markets (McMichael, 2012). As of 2010, several investors have acquired an estimated total of 56 million hectares of land globally, of which 29 million were based in sub-Saharan Africa (ElHadary and Obeng-Odoom, 2012). This global 'land-grab' phenomenon is a major concern for marginalized populations, who are becoming increasingly aware of their rights and their corresponding (in)ability to claim ownership over their indigenous land and natural resources. These prevailing issues have increased the saliency of the land question in socio-economic and political discussions, facilitated by the global shift towards 'pro-poor' policies (see Hall, 2011; Cotula et al., 2014).

The term 'land grab' refers to "large-scale, cross-border land deals or transactions that are carried out by transnational corporations or initiated by foreign governments" (Zoomers, 2010, 429). But it must be noted that the global land grab "is hardly anything new", especially when one considers the historical legacy of colonialism and those settler projects dependent upon the large-scale dispossession of native peoples from their lands (McMichael, 2014, 34). Yet, current land enclosures represent a sort of 'tipping point' in this cyclical narrative. For one, the flattening of the world by globalization, the liberalization of land

markets and the correlated global boom in foreign investments has established connections "between people and places on a world scale" (Zoomers, 2010, 430). On notions of scale and intersections, this paper further shows that both private interests and national (or local) governments simultaneously play important roles in contemporary land grabs. Despite the methodological and practical difficulties researchers have identified with regard to obtaining precise data on the number and size of land acquisitions in Africa, existing findings generally offer "a cautionary tale on the potential of large-scale land deals to contribute to poverty reduction and inclusive development" (Cotula et al., 2014, 922).

Land grab is a heterogeneous term that refers to transactions of different scales and for different purposes. This paper focuses on land grabbing in the extractive sector and seeks to answer a specific question: in what particular ways does land acquisition for mineral extraction lead to forms of dispossession and marginalization, thereby reducing communities' access to meaningful livelihoods? This question is premised on the overarching argument that the proliferation of mineral extraction and resultant dispossession of people from their land undermines the potential contribution of mining to sustainable livelihood outcomes in host communities. In the context of this paper, land dispossession implies the loss of entitlement to and further marginalization from one's land, especially land on which people had hitherto made a living through subsistence agriculture. Thus, dispossession results from

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rural dwellers' lack of access to and power over land as a basis of survival.

Drawing upon community perspectives gathered through primary field research, this paper contributes to the scholarship on land policy and natural resource governance in Africa by reflecting on the ramifications of large-scale mining for sustainable livelihoods. It attempts to advance our understanding of how dispossession occurs as part of mining activities, emphasizing the need for this issue to be better addressed in both scholarly and policy discourses. Dispossession as it relates to the land grab phenomenon in Africa's mining sector is under-theorized. While subsistence farmers and local dwellers are losing their land to large-scale mining activities, their plight remains a marginalized discourse. By shedding light on experiences of land dispossession in Ghana's mining sector, this paper analyzes this important driver of social injustice and poverty in communities expected to benefit from the trickle-down effects of mineral exploitation.

The paper begins by exploring the link between land and dispossession, drawing on the theorization of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2004). Following this conceptual section, a brief discussion of the data collection methods is provided. The crux of the paper surrounds community perspectives on dispossession and marginalized livelihoods. Employing insights from fieldwork data, this section entails an empirical assessment of the relationship between land and livelihoods, as well as a contextualization of the three characteristics of dispossession identified by Peluso and Lund (2011). The concluding section outlines the paper's contribution to scholarly knowledge and reflects on a couple of policy-relevant suggestions. In employing the notion of 'community', as indicated in the title of this paper, the intention is not to universalize local peoples' experiences or to portray the diverse social relations and spaces in which such experiences emerge as homogeneous. Rather, it serves as a useful terminology to facilitate an analytical categorization of the different individuals, groups, and locations I engaged with during field research.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

The concepts of land acquisition or accumulation and dispossession are buzzwords that require proper contextualization. The following two sub-sections examine the connections between land and dispossession, and the theorization of accumulation by dispossession and its relevance to this paper.

2.1. Linkages between land and dispossession

In Africa, like in other parts of the world, land has been central to economic analysis. In these discussions, the global competition for land and its natural resources by transnational mining corporations (TMCs) – what Hall (2011) categorizes as land for non-food production purposes – has been poorly understood despite its historical significance to contemporary land discourses. Although there is a general agreement within the circles of the United Nations (UN) and other international development agencies that securing land tenure is imperative for human development, there is still a great deal of controversy over land relations (Obeng-Odoom, 2012). This controversy is evinced by two opposing schools of thought – one proposing land policies around a theory of social capital (i.e. community land rights) and the other along the lines of institutional economics (i.e. individualized property rights systems), as advanced by scholars like Hernando de Soto (Boone, 2007).

Advocates of individual land rights (a.k.a. 'statutory' rights) argue that it is only under conditions of private ownership that individuals possess the incentive to use land efficiently and sustainably. This argument is premised on the so-called 'tragedy of the commons', whereby not having individual interest in a particular resource or property leads to its misuse, which ultimately harms the common good (see Hardin, 1998, 2009). Through formalization, individual land titles can be used as collateral to secure credit and, as a result, can help the poor

overcome endemic poverty (Agarwal, 2003). Community land rights advocates, in contrast, draw on concepts of social capital and social network theory to argue the opposite view. They believe that communal forms of land tenure align better with the traditions and customs of society, helping to build and empower stronger networks of people working together to advance the judicious distribution of resources.

The socially embedded nature of land relations in Africa has important implications for the equitable redistribution of land. The prevailing dualism between 'statutory' and 'customary' land complicates this issue further (Chimhowu and Woodhouse, 2006; Sousa Santos, 2006). The fact that most parcels of land are still under customary or communal ownership suggests that people could have access to some land for cultivation and other subsistence uses. This ambiguity means tenure and ownership of land is negotiable and flexible – hence the growing social competition and conflict over land and the deepening exclusion of people deemed to have 'customary' rights over the land (Andrews, 2016).

Beyond the communal-statutory rights dichotomy, agrarian political economists have also examined notions of *access* and *capacity* – which entail the power to acquire, control and distribute land and the ability to accrue expected benefits from such land-based transactions (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). This theoretical perspective is insightful when one considers the gendered and class-based undercurrents of land transactions (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr, 2017). The emphasis on access and capacity is also useful when answering the research question posed earlier: in what particular ways does land acquisition for mineral extraction lead to forms of dispossession and marginalization, thereby reducing communities' access to meaningful livelihoods? In discussing land dispossession, one must understand both "who is being dispossessed of what and the types of rights and power they had to access property prior to dispossession" (Kenney-Lazar, 2012, 1021). Answers to these crucial questions are by no means straightforward given the diversity of actors and the ambiguities inherent to the socio-economic relations of which they are apart. Thus, the objective of the empirical section below is not to provide definite answers, but rather to shed light on how these questions around dispossession and marginalization may be understood.

2.2. Accumulation by dispossession

The concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' is an expansion of Karl Marx's original theory of capital accumulation, which is typically based on the assumption of a "freely functioning competitive markets with institutional arrangements of private property, juridical individualism, freedom of contract and appropriate structures of law and governance guaranteed by a 'facilitative' state which also secures the integrity of money as a store of value and as a medium of circulation" (Harvey, 2004, 73). In specific terms, Marx's dialectical method sought to show how market liberalization, and by extension its contemporary neoliberal variant, cannot promise an equitable world that makes everyone better off. While certain aspects of Marx's original theorizations regarding the repercussions of capitalism remain salient today, new mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession have emerged involving the depletion of the global environmental commons (i.e. land, air, water, forests, wildlife), the wholesale commodification of nature, and the depletion of habitat, among others (Harvey, 2004).

A prevailing characteristic of contemporary iterations of the accumulation by dispossession phenomenon is the marginalization of people expected to benefit from the supposed 'development' capitalist accumulation promises (Sanyal, 2007). In fact, existing evidence suggests that poverty is inherently created and re-created under the institutions of capitalism. As such, the quest to eradicate poverty remains far-fetched if these institutions are not understood and their negative consequences mitigated (Harriss-White, 2006). Other scholars insist that forgetting the crises or contradictions that emerge out of global capital accumulation result in human insecurity (Soederberg, 2004). As argued

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