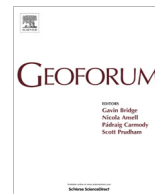




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum)

# Imageries of the contested concepts “land grabbing” and “land transactions”: Implications for biofuels investments in Ghana

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## ARTICLE INFO

Article history:  
Available online xxx

Keywords:  
Biofuels investments  
Discourses  
Contested concepts  
Land grabbing  
Land transaction  
Ghana

## ABSTRACT

In Ghana, the contested concepts of “land grabbing” and “land transaction” are strategically applied by proponents of critical and win–win discourses respectively to describe outcomes of land deals. Using case study methods and discourse analysis, this paper explores four cases of biofuels investments in Ghana and the implications of the choice of concepts used to represent them. Proponents of the critical discourse use the “land grabbing” concept to invoke imageries of “illegality”, “theft” and “food insecurity” when describing land deals. Consequently, some biofuels investments have been hampered in their potential to generate profit and local employment. The biofuel investors in this study, whose projects have been labeled “land grabbing”, therefore switched to food production to downplay public scepticism. Proponents of the win–win discourse portray biofuels investments as “pro-poor” projects and use the “land transaction” concept to pre-empt possible public criticisms in the media and elsewhere. Such representations of these biofuels investments are therefore mainly intended to pre-empt criticisms or attract public praise. Some projects with potentially promising outcomes have thus been terminated, while others with problematic outcomes have continued to be promoted. In contexts characterized by weak land regulations and ambivalence towards large-scale agriculture, the trajectory and outcomes of biofuels investments are often influenced by land deal representations drawn from global discourses and how they interact with pre-existing local discourses.

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## 1. Introduction and the argument

*The environment and how we acquire, disseminate, and legitimate knowledge about it are highly politicized, reflective of relations of power, and contested* (Roderick P. Neumann, 2005, p. 1)

Land acquisitions or land deals have been an important part in the history of most states. At the turn of the 21st century, debates about land deals which seemed to have died out following the emergence of modern sovereign states have flared up again with greater intensity—now re-presented either as “land grabbing” or “land transactions”. These terminologies around land deals are drawn from the competing global “win–win” and “critical” discourses which have underpinned land deals debates at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and among Civil Society Organizations at several international fora during the past decade. The “win–win” discourse expresses potentially positive outcomes of land deals for both host regions and investors (IFAD, 2011, 2010), whereas the “critical” discourse

portrays detrimental outcomes for the poor especially in host regions with weak state institutions (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009; Foodfirst Information and Advocacy Network [FIAN] International, 2010). Proponents of the “critical” discourse use the “land grabbing” concept to describe potentially negative consequences of land deals for food security, land tenure and livelihoods in host countries (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009; FAO, 2012; Rahmato, 2011). Proponents of the “win–win” discourse however prefer the “land transactions” concept due to what they argue are potentially promising outcomes especially for developing countries (BBC News Africa, 2012; IFAD, 2011, 2010).

Using either the “land grabbing” or “land transaction” term to describe potential outcomes of large-scale land deals creates conceptual dilemmas due to the different imageries they invoke and their political implications. An important contribution of post-structuralism to the field of political ecology has been the introduction of discourse analysis and the importance of exploring and revealing the ways in which the environment and its problems are discursively constructed (Neumann, 2005). Some studies during the past decade illuminate what they describe as “false knowledge” or “myths” produced from value-laden representations of environmental problems and prompt a need for critical engagement with so-called “scientific explanations” to ensure a better formulation of environmental policies (see Forsyth, 2011, 2003;

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.10.009>

Please cite this article in press as: Boamah, F. Imageries of the contested concepts “land grabbing” and “land transactions”: Implications for biofuels investments in Ghana. *Geoforum* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.10.009>

Leach, 2007; Guthman, 1997; Fairhead and Leach, 1995). Many recent studies have equally used value-laden concepts to describe possible social, economic and political outcomes of large-scale land deals (see Wisborg, 2012; Matondi et al., 2011; IFAD, 2011; von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009). Land deals representations in these recent studies often involve the use of persuasive value-laden concepts and framings intended to invoke strong emotions, heated debates and reactions, but they seldom highlight the implications of the associated imageries for public perceptions about large-scale agricultural investments. This paper shows how and why value-laden concepts used to describe large-scale land deals influence the trajectory and outcomes of biofuels investments<sup>1</sup> in Ghana, which is largely characterized by ambivalence towards large-scale agriculture amongst the population.

Ghana predominantly has a customary land ownership regime, with about 80% of land held by customary landowners; mainly families, clans and traditional authorities<sup>2</sup> (Kasanga and Kotey, 2001). The remaining land areas are privately owned or under state control. In this customary land regime, land embodies the rights of “primordial” groups such as villages, stools,<sup>3</sup> families and kinship groups (Aryeetey et al., 2007) and radical land transformation are often perceived by small-scale landholders as a recipe for potential land dispossession. For example, the fear of possible land dispossession and disruption of small-holder production systems among Ghanaians during the 1890s by the British Colonial Administration, which aimed to vest in the British Crown all unoccupied land areas, forest lands and minerals, led to resistance (Fold and Whitfield, 2012). The incidences of “forceful” land dispossession in Ghana to develop large-scale plantations by post-independence governments of Ghana are also cases in point (Fold and Whitfield, 2012).

Despite the pre-existing skepticism towards large-scale agriculture among some Ghanaians, many post-independence governments of Ghana, receptive to neo-liberal economic policies in the area of agriculture, have shown continued support for foreign direct investments in land (Fold and Whitfield, 2012; Vãth and Kirk, 2011; Technoserve, 2007). The governments’ ostensible motivations in supporting these investments have been premised on possible improvements in employment creation and food security (Brew-Hammond, 2009; Vãth and Kirk, 2011). Some chiefs in Ghana have also given out many large land areas categorised as “marginal” or “unused” during the past decade with the aim of creating development opportunities for rural communities (Boamah, forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b; Tsikata and Yaro, 2011). Most of these recent land deals have involved the cultivation of jatropha for the production of liquid biofuels primarily to improve energy provision and the employment situation in Ghana, as well as for export (Ghana Energy Commission, 2005; Schoneveld et al., 2010; Brew-Hammond, 2009; Technoserve, 2007). However, the ambivalence of the general population towards large-scale agriculture draws attention to the co-existence of two competing local discourses in Ghana. Firstly, there is a discourse that identifies land as a means of social cohesion (Aryeetey et al., 2007) and large-scale agriculture as potentially dangerous to pre-existing small-scale landholdings (Amanor, 2001). Secondly, there is a discourse that identifies investments in land as a potential engine of development for deprived rural communities endowed with large areas of “unused” or “marginal” land. These respective local discourses correspond with, or are reinforced

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the term “biofuel” instead of “agrofuel” is used because most policy documents and debates on renewable energy in Ghana often discuss biofuel as synonymous with fuel from crops plants.

<sup>2</sup> A Traditional Council comprises paramount chiefs, village chiefs and elders of communities. A Traditional Council is headed by a Paramount Chief. Migrants cultivating lands under the trusteeship of traditional councils pay agricultural tributes in return to acknowledge chiefs’ authority over such lands.

<sup>3</sup> Stools refer to the traditional heads of communities or villages, usually village chiefs.

by, the “land grabbing” and “land transaction” concepts, which are now being used to describe outcomes of the surge in large-scale land deals in Ghana during the past decade.

Analyses of the implications of the use of the “land grabbing” and “land transaction” concepts is particularly important in contexts characterized by ambivalence towards large-scale agriculture that simultaneously lack strong land regulations. For instance despite the surge in large-scale land deals for biofuels investments in Ghana, the Draft Biofuels Policy (2005), *Renewable Energy Act (2011)* and *Draft Bioenergy strategy (2011)* developed by Ghanaian governments failed to address key issues such as land acquisitions processes, biofuels markets and government incentives that are critical for biofuels development. Similar lapses can be found in a new land regulation developed by the Ghana Lands Commission in 2012 to regulate large-scale land deals for agricultural investments in Ghana (Ghana Lands Commission, 2012). Whilst this new regulation retains the pre-existing land transfer prerequisites of mutual agreement between prospective land grantors and land grantees, and EPA<sup>4</sup> approval, the only innovation is the referral to the National Land Commission for deliberation for land allocations exceeding 400 hectares. The transfer of land allocation registration from the Regional to the National level is yet to register any demonstrable impacts as it is an extension of usual bureaucratic processes. In this context of weak regulation on biofuels and land transfers, Civil Society Organizations, chiefs, researchers, the media and other non-state actors in Ghana consistently use the “land grabbing” and “land transaction” concepts to describe possible outcomes of land deals for biofuels investment. The author neither intends to indict users of the two concepts nor offer alternatives, but rather to illuminate the imageries associated with the concepts and their implications for the trajectory and outcomes of biofuels investments in Ghana. The trajectory here refers to the changes from biofuel crop to food crop production, whereas the broader outcomes refer to the impacts on energy provision, livelihoods and social responsibility measures in the project areas.

In contexts characterized by weak land regulations and ambivalence towards large-scale agriculture, the trajectory and outcomes of biofuels investments are often influenced by land deal representations drawn from global discourses that correspond with pre-existing local discourses. This argument is elucidated by examining three main issues. Firstly, the conventional criteria for the conceptualization of land deals based on possible outcomes, procedures, the size and actors involved are discussed. Secondly, the polarized representation of biofuels investments by researchers, chiefs, media and NGOs in Ghana is analysed. The final section examines the relative effectiveness of the imageries associated with the two contested concepts in influencing the trajectory and outcomes of biofuels investments in Ghana. The central argument is expatiated by exploring the cases of four biofuels investment projects. Case I is based on an earlier study on jatropha biofuels project in Northern Ghana. Cases II and III are also based on jatropha biofuels projects in Southern and Central Ghana respectively. Cases II and III are based on an on-going PhD study and constitute the main cases in this paper. Case IV focuses on another jatropha project in Northern Ghana which was visited during the main PhD fieldwork. For analytical purposes, although equally contested, the term “land deals” is used throughout this paper as a neutral concept.

### 1.1. How concepts become contested

Debates are framed, phenomena are represented and ideas are communicated through discourses. Foucault perceived discourses

<sup>4</sup> Environmental Protection Agency. Its core mandate is to protect and improve the environment in Ghana.

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