



Trajectories of large-scale land acquisition dynamics in Angola: Diversity, histories, and implications for the political economy of development in Africa



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ABSTRACT

Numerous large scale land acquisitions have occurred in Angola since partial political and economic liberalization in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and further increased after 2002 and the end of armed conflict. They have occurred in conjunction with the emergence of a range of large state-coordinated agricultural projects, often by foreign contractors, for domestic food, and involving plans for backwards and forwards linkages to agro-processing and manufacturing initiatives. Altogether such land allocations and projects involve several billion dollars and several million hectares. These activities appear to often also involve high-level officials and/or wealthy Angolans and are often interpreted as neo-patrimonialism, state-sanctioned private accumulation, and instances of continuity in extractive institutions. Yet examining specific agrarian transformations illustrates how land and rural poverty in Angola are much more complex than a zero-sum game of elite accumulation of private land concessions. Key are Angola's geo-historical trajectories of colonialism, war, socialism and liberalization, which the article examines in two concessions in Malanje Province. We address the relationships between international enterprises and domestic elites, and the relevance of land dynamics within a long-term political economy perspective on capitalist industrialization and structural transformation in Angola and Africa.

1. Introduction

Amidst considerable attention to Large Scale Land Acquisitions (LSLA) over the past decade, scholars, policy-makers, and advocates have continued to struggle to understand and shape the important roles of states and politics in LSLA processes.¹ Reflecting on Angola's experience with LSLAs is important and revealing because the country has since the 1990s experienced the allocation of millions of hectares of land concessions. Moreover, carefully understanding Angola's experiences is important because the country – with its long histories of slave, diamond, and oil trades – is often (mis)understood as a particularly clear extreme example of how extractive politics result in LSLAs. In contrast, we view extraction and land dynamically and hence analyze LSLAs in Angola not as inevitable outcomes of inertial institutions of extraction, but rather as contingently produced through cumulative combinations of multiple geographical and historical processes. Our

analysis has implications not only for Angola as a large and regionally significant country, but also more broadly for approaches to LSLAs, the state and development.

LSLAs are part of broader tendencies in Angola that are not clearly attributable primarily to extraction and elite accumulation, though those are important. Rather, as we detail in two significant instances below, LSLAs in Angola are better understood as part of broader tendencies that have emerged from the cumulative combinations in Angola of processes of colonialism, socialism, war, and liberalization (CSWL). Practically, our different perspective also recasts the obstacles to progressive change on LSLAs and suggests new promising avenues for advocacy. In this introduction, we lay out conventional approaches to understanding Angola and LSLAs, then address findings of other detailed research on LSLAs, elaborate our own approach emphasizing combined processes, and provide some brief background on land in Angola.

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¹ Cottula et al. (2016), Edelman and Borrás (2016), World Bank (2017). Hall et al. (2016: 46) recognize that “The role of the state” remains a major unresolved issue in LSLA research and advocacy.

Angola features prominently in influential theorizations of African political economy (Bayart, 2009; Cooper, 2002: 140–4; Ferguson, 2006: 27–42, 196–210; Reno, 1998: 61–77), which in turn have shaped studies of and prescriptions for land and property regimes (e.g. Cotula et al., 2016: 13–14; Peters, 2004: 88).² These perspectives suggest viewing LSLAs in Angola as visible spatial examples of continuities in Angola's inertial institutions of extractive politics (Chabal, 2001; Hodges, 2001; Kyle, 2005; Soares de Oliveira, 2007; Ovidia, 2015).³ In previous centuries, such arguments contend, colonial rule and the associated “creole” elite power centered on extracting wealth from coastal control of trade in slaves (Angola being one of the largest historic sources) and commodities, and then replaced by Portuguese colonialists operating a few enclaves of diamonds, cotton, sugar, coffee, and oil. Post-independence socialism from 1975 to 1989 saw creole elites resume power (also returning from exile sustained through geopolitical patronage), and extract foreign aid and revive enclaves. Then, fueled by off shore oil (furnishing about 80% of state revenue), war is seen as involving elite extraction through military expenditure and appropriation of enclaves, while liberalization boosted elite extraction through trade and privatization of enclaves. Hence, each major period of Angolan history is viewed as continuing in various forms the same basic sort of underlying elite extractive politics and enclaves.

In such a view, the example of a large land concession passing from colonial, to socialist, to military and private elite hands therefore appears as a self-evident tangible example of land access being determined by a continuity in extractive politics across different periods of history. This view of Angola is marshalled in Peters' (2004: 88) influential analysis of the structural constraints to negotiability in customary tenure in Africa (drawing on Hodges' (2001) prominent book): “Even the attempt to address the problem of land access by the mass of peasants was railroaded by the coastal elite to acquire large areas of land in the interior. The case of Angola may be extreme, but it parallels affairs in other countries ...”

Consequently, the present article's reexamination of LSLAs in Angola is not matter of identifying exceptional local particularities, but rather has implications for more broadly re-conceptualizing the politics of LSLAs, poverty, and development. Ever more detailed research on LSLAs has moved beyond general interpretations such as those mentioned above and increasingly emphasized the importance of diversity and history in understanding LSLAs, and especially for formulating more locally adapted approaches to land (Hall et al., 2015a, 2015b; Wolford et al., 2013). Reviews of LSLA research find multiple, varied complex geo-historical processes (Cotula et al., 2014; Hall, 2011), which complicate binary narratives of untrammelled powerful elites accumulating by dispossessing passive victims, though of course LSLAs can be associated with corruption,

² Analysis draws on 2.5 years of field research between 2008 and 2013, involving ethnography, hundreds of semi-structured interviews, and review of archives and grey literature, primarily in Malanje and Luanda. Hundreds studies and regulations related to rural land in Angola are listed in deGrassi, Aaron. 2015. Provisional reconstructions: Geohistories of infrastructure and agrarian configuration in Malanje, Angola. PhD Dissertation, Geography, University of California, Berkeley).

³ E.g. “Once established, institutions gain a life of their own and are extremely difficult to bypass” (Soares de Oliveira, 2015: 47). This is also termed “path dependence” in other literature. Similarly, Cooper (2002), and Bayart's (2009: xxxi) emphasis on the “the historicity of extraversion,” also reference Messiant's complex work, which emphasizes “continuities” and sometimes rests on “personal analysis” (1997: 131). This emphasis on continuity also meshes with using neopatrimonialism as a lens to understand land, agriculture and development in Africa (Alden Wily, 2011: 738–9; Cotula et al., 2016: 13–14; cf. deGrassi, 2008). Compare also Mahoney and Thelen's (2015) review of the changes, debates, and diversity in related historical institutionalist approaches. Much of that literature draws on North's (1990: 3) problematic definition, “Institutions are the rules of the game in a society,” with ‘extractive institutions’ “designed to extract incomes and wealth from one subset of society to benefit a different subset” (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012: 76). In that sense we refer to analysts' problematic views of neopatrimonialism and rent-seeking as institutions or ‘norms’ of behavior associated with extraction.

patronage, and various forms of elite accumulation.⁴ Indeed, what is notable about conventional narratives emphasizing an Angolan historic continuity in extractive institutions is that such narratives often are not based on fine-grained analysis of history and extraction. In contrast, close research on the “dual nature” of the oil industry and other sectors shows, for example, how polices can both create some economic growth while also enabling new forms of elite accumulation (Ovidia, 2012, 2016, 2017). A deep rethinking of the political economy of land is long-overdue and necessary to make more sound use of archives, literature, and new research in Angola.

However, to assume that the histories and diversity of different politics and forms of LSLAs are *primarily* important to enable better tailoring of projects and policies to local contexts also risks downplaying fundamental questions of who can actually mobilize (and how) the political pressure and means for such tailoring. Indeed, the above-mentioned different approaches to conceptualizing history and diversity themselves can imply drastically different actions for advocacy and policy. We contend that emphasizing the ways in which diverse situations are produced through combinations of multiple common broader processes can help make mobilization efforts resonate across different sectors, identities, and areas, and hence help forge the broader popular political alliances necessary for effectively changing policies, institutions, and societies to better address issues of land, poverty and development (Hart, 2002).

Our examination of LSLAs in Angola illustrates how they emerge as part of broader developmental and problematic *tendencies*, which in turn result from combined CSWL *processes*. On one hand, developmental tendencies included emphases on regional development, integrated agro-industry, infrastructure and logistics, import substituting industrialization, poverty alleviation, protections against market speculation, and domestic reinvestment. On the other hand, more anti-developmental tendencies include modernism, excessive formalism and bureaucracy, technocratic perspectives, importation of foreign models, militarism, patriarchal and masculinist practices and institutions, lack of evaluation and accountability, and, as we particularly emphasize below, top-down approaches, large-scale and capital-intensive projects, emphases on material logistics over administration, and foreign contracting. These tendencies are important to understand in their own right and are not epiphenomena reducible ultimately to elite gain; rather, as we show in the next sections, they have emerged through the cumulative combination of various processes.

Because LSLAs in Angola involve not simply extraction but rather a range of tendencies, therefore explaining LSLAs requires addressing a range of issues, and not only invoking how LSLAs function as elite accumulation. Consequently, research and action will also need to go beyond the issue of LSLAs in order to substantively address pressing concerns of dispossession, poverty and accumulation in the Angolan countryside. The complex mix of tendencies also means that challenges for agriculture and development in Angola are much deeper than just land grabbing to be remedied by liberal prescriptions of good governance. But, more encouragingly, it also means that Angolan political economy is not beset by immutably extractive institutions prohibiting substantial development and poverty alleviation.

To understand Angola's important diversity and history, some basic details are necessary. Angola has 125 million hectares (ha), approximately twice the size of France, and around 35–60 million ha of arable land, of which 5 million are used (8–14 percent of arable land).⁵ About two thirds of economically active people are engaged in agriculture, but only about 38 percent of Angola's population of roughly 25 million are classified as rural (INE, 2011). Millions of people were displaced by

⁴ Marques de Morais, R. 2016. Land-Grabbing as a Path to Riches and Status in Angola, Maka Angola, 29 January 29, http://www.makaangola.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11842, accessed July 2016.

⁵ FAOSTAT, <http://faostat.fao.org/site/377/default.aspx#ancor>, last accessed July 2016; (2013) ‘Angola with 35-million hectare arable surface,’ ANGOP, November 18; ANGOP refers to the Angola Press Agency's online articles at <http://www.angop.ao/>, last accessed in May 2016.

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