



The role of chiefs in large-scale land acquisitions for jatropha production in Ghana: insights from agrarian political economy

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ABSTRACT

Ghana experienced a surge in large-scale land acquisitions in the past decade spearheaded by the bioenergy crop jatropha. To accommodate such acquisitions, small and medium-sized land holdings were consolidated to develop large parcels of land that could accommodate large-scale investments. Chiefs have been an important player in these processes as they are supposed to be the custodians of land in Ghana. However, they often engage with such land acquisition processes in a counterproductive manner, deeply affecting their outcomes. Chiefs often act as the gatekeepers of large-scale land acquisitions, helping foreign donors/investors and the state steer the institutional landscape of land tenure, which is not only complicated but also prone to social conflicts. In order to unravel the exact roles that chiefs have played in such processes (and the motivations behind their actions) we adopt an agrarian political economy framework based on the five key questions: “who owns what”, “who does what”, “who gets what”, “who interacts with whom” and “participation by whom in what”. To answer these questions, we conduct interviews with chiefs, experts and local households around five collapsed jatropha plantations in Ghana. Our empirical analysis suggests that chiefs often went beyond their customary roles as land custodians, by occasionally acting as land owners/sellers, expropriators, negotiators, receivers of compensation, and sources of conflict. These roles are to an extent an outcome of the weak, undocumented and largely discretionary land administration system of Ghana, which allows chiefs benefit by bypassing both customary and statutory land laws. Chiefs were often motivated by expected economic gains for themselves at the expense of the communal interests. On some cases this unconstructive role catalysed the collapse of the jatropha investments. These suggest the need for deep land policy reforms within the land administration system of Ghana. While the recent adoption of guidelines for large-scale land acquisitions promoted by the government of Ghana is a good start, land policy reforms should go deeper. Further reforms would be needed to strengthen the current legislation in terms of harmonizing all land laws, as well as outlining explicit directives for land negotiations, compensation (including defining the rightful recipients of compensation) and the effective evaluation of large-scale land acquisitions.

1. Introduction

The recent interest for foreign direct investments (FDIs) in commercial agriculture has been an essential driver of (and strategy for) economic development in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Schoneveld, 2014). The potential pressure that large-scale commercial agriculture (and other land-based investments) can put on land has gained ample attention in the academic literature with a wealth of research on land availability for large-scale agricultural development (Cai et al., 2011; Lund, 2012; German et al., 2013; Gibbs and Salmon, 2015).

Biofuel feedstocks have constituted a substantial portion of large-

scale acquisitions during the last decade in SSA (Messerli et al., 2014; Schoneveld, 2014). Jatropha in particular has been a major contributor to large-scale land acquisition processes around the continent (Gasparatos et al., 2015; Schoneveld, 2014). Often investors have used discursive constructs such as ‘marginal lands’, ‘idle lands’, or ‘under-utilised lands’ in order to obtain the support necessary to gain access to land for feedstock cultivation and downplay any potential negative effects on food security (Ahmed et al., 2017a).

However, despite such discursive constructs, prevailing land tenure systems influence quite substantially the modalities and complexities that accompany large-scale land acquisitions. In most SSA countries,

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land is customarily and communally owned, with chiefs¹ acting as custodians of the local communities' allodial interests (Anafo, 2015; Biitir and Nara, 2016). The different types of tenure arrangements in SSA reinforce land fragmentation, thereby complicating large-scale agricultural development (Abubakari et al., 2016).

For example, in order to obtain land parcels of sufficient size to accommodate large-scale agricultural production it is often necessary to consolidate smaller parcels of land from individual landowners, families or broader segments of the local communities. Such consolidation processes are usually mediated by local chiefs and generally involve the re-allocation of fragmented parcels of land (Abubakari et al., 2016), which are then transferred from local land users to foreign investors (Cotula, 2012). However, due to the complicated land tenure and land compensation processes in several African countries, including Ghana, the process followed for large-scale land acquisitions is not always clear on procedures and responsibilities (German et al., 2013).

Land acquisition processes as the ones outlined above have often been perceived in a negative light by academics, and have been commonly branded as 'land grabbing', 'primitive accumulation' or 'land-seizure' (Cotula, 2012; Coscieme et al., 2016). Neoliberal policies have largely influenced the recent surge in land acquisitions and possibly land-grabbing' and 'primitive accumulation in Africa (Becker and Wittmeyer, 2013; O'Laughlin, 2016). It is often asserted that the negative externalities of 'land grabbing' stem from the direct involvement of sovereign governments or large private investors (Cotula, 2012; German et al., 2013). Several studies have emphasised the role of other stakeholders for creating the enabling conditions for land grabbing, including national governments, professional farming groups, civil society organisations, and other public workers (Fold and Gough, 2008; German et al., 2013; Cotula, 2012; Boamah, 2014a; Wendimu, 2016). Different stakeholders have contributed deliberately or undeliberately to such neoliberal policies, ultimately playing a key role in the expropriation of land during large-scale land acquisitions (Becker and Wittmeyer, 2013; Buscher, 2010; Jacobs, 2013).

Several studies have identified the critical role of chiefs in land transactions during the recent land rush, and the significant impact they can have both within and outside their local communities (Schoneveld, 2017; German et al., 2013). For example, studies have pointed the unconstructive role that chiefs and other local elites have played during jatropha-related large-scale land acquisitions, and how they contributed to the collapse of jatropha projects (Acheampong and Campion, 2014; Boamah, 2014b; Neimark, 2016). Other studies have explored the unconstructive role of chiefs in terms of participation and decentralisation in resources management (Ribot, 1996, 2003; Berry, 2004).

However, despite a series of institutional analyses (e.g. German et al., 2013), there has been relatively limited empirical research about the role that chiefs play in large-scale land acquisitions. This includes major gaps on how chiefs can use their cultural and political powers to empower foreign operators and the state in land deals, as well as how this has affected local communities and the land investments themselves.

The aim of the study is to critically examine the involvement of chiefs in large-scale land acquisition processes, using insights from the recent jatropha expansion in Ghana. As jatropha-related land acquisitions happened relatively recently, they can offer a good case study for understanding how chiefs engage in land acquisition processes, and what their roles, motivations and effects of their actions have been on local communities and agricultural investments. We focus on Ghana because it is one of the SSA countries that has experienced one of the

biggest surges in large-scale land acquisition in the past decade, especially for jatropha production (Ahmed et al., 2017a; Schoneveld, 2014). Jatropha was major bioenergy feedstock promoted by the government of Ghana since the mid-2000s without having appropriate guidelines for large-scale land acquisitions in place, or even a solid knowledge base about the agronomy of the crop (Ahmed et al., 2017b).² It is also worth mentioning that land issues have become even more visible following the collapse of the jatropha sector in Ghana (Ahmed et al., 2017a) that left a legacy of unresolved land issues related to whether/how the local communities can regain land access after the collapse of jatropha investments and who is responsible for the agro-ecological restoration of the large areas already converted into jatropha (Ahmed et al., 2017c).

The study employs the main agrarian political economy questions of Bernstein (2010) supplemented by concepts from Borrás et al (2010), Ribot (1996; 2003) and (Obeng-Odoom, 2015a). Understanding the roles that chiefs play and their motivation can offer a better perspective on policy choices and land reforms that go beyond the mere adoption of guidelines for large-scale land acquisitions.

Section 2 provides an overview of the institutional and historical context of land acquisitions in Ghana, and the role that chiefs have played. Section 3 introduces our analytical approach and the study sites. Section 4 highlights some of the most pertinent questions regarding the role of chiefs in the political economy of large-scale jatropha land acquisitions in Ghana. Section 5 explores the motivations behind the roles that chiefs adopted in large-scale land acquisition processes. Section 6 unravels their implications for the collapse of jatropha projects in Ghana. Section 7 highlights how some of the main findings of our study could inform future policies for the agrarian system of Ghana, while Section 8 outlines some of the gaps of our study and suggested future research.

2. Institutional and historical context of land acquisition and chiefs' involvement in Ghana

The involvement of chiefs in the politics of customary land in Ghana can be better understood when taking into consideration two distinct aspects. The first relates to how the state has attempted to formalize the customary land system and establish institutions that shape the relationship between rights-holders (local communities) and duty-bearers (state institutions). Such interventions eventually introduced the concepts of land lease and eminent domain (Mends, 2006; Yaro, 2012; Abubakari et al., 2016) that gave new powers to chiefs for the allocation of land (Amanor, 2010).

The second relates to the fact that between 2005 and 2012 due to the lack of clear guidelines on how to navigate large-scale land acquisition processes, chiefs have influenced significantly several of the large-scale acquisitions. This could not have been more evident in the mid-to-late 2000s surge of biofuel-related FDIs in Ghana (Boamah, 2014b). More specifically between 2005 and 2008, about 21 Jatropha projects gained access to nearly 1 million hectares of land, with most collapsing within 5 years of operation (Ahmed et al., 2017a). Chiefs often played a key role in the collapse of jatropha projects (Acheampong and Campion, 2014; Boamah, 2014b; Ahmed and Gasparatos, 2016). For example, Boamah (2014a) discusses how chiefs formalised land deals using different informal procedures. Campion and Acheampong (2014) show how chiefs and traditional institutions served as sources of conflicts and at the same time arbitrated disputes in biofuel projects, focusing particularly on land conflicts and how they were/could be mediated.

¹ For the purpose of this paper we define chiefs as those persons with jurisdiction, power and control of land resources over a particular social stratification. In several parts of SSA chiefs are seen as the link between the people and the Gods, who make decisions on behalf of the subjects. (i.e. local communities) A chief is in most cases the traditional head ruler of a certain tribe or community.

² Other potential biofuel feedstocks in Ghana such as oil palm and sugarcane have not experienced the unprecedented boom of jatropha. Other industrial crops such as cocoa and cotton have a long history of formalization in Ghana, and are mainly pursued through smallholder production rather than through FDIs as jatropha.

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