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Factors of vulnerability: How large-scale land acquisitions take advantage of local and national weaknesses in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

Enticing economic benefits for host nations and the notion of large areas of land considered available are often put forward as the main reasons for large-scale land acquisition in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa. However, country-level datasets of land acquisitions seem to indicate a clear divide between a majority of countries engaged in land acquisitions as investors and those involved as targets. We posit that there are socio-economic and governance factors that make the engagement between targets of land acquisitions and investors both unequal and attractive to large-scale investments. We then ask the question: what are the factors that make communities vulnerable to an unequal engagement with large-scale land-investing interests in Sierra Leone? We explore this question using local-level socio-economic data of households and communities in two settings where land acquisitions have occurred in Sierra Leone. We find that socio-economic characteristics of local populations, such as levels of education, the powerful role of traditional chiefs and corruption, make these areas easier targets for such land investments. Investors also exploit the poor economic situation of local areas by making alluring promises of development opportunities. The vulnerability of local people to land investors is further undermined by poor governance at the national level and external politico-financial interest in favor of such investments. Local populations are vulnerable to organized campaigns of land acquisitions by multi-national companies. Proper legal and institutional frameworks are required to protect local interests in these land deals.

1. Introduction

In its broadest terms, large-scale land acquisitions (LSLA) refer to the acquisition or leasing of large areas of land by foreign investors for a variety of purposes (Cotula and Vermeulen, 2009; Robertson and Pinstrup-Andersen, 2010; Rulli et al., 2013). This phenomenon manifests differently in terms of the main drivers, its scale and the outcomes across diverse regions where it occurs (Borras et al., 2012). This makes it difficult to ascribe a universal definition of the phenomenon. In most countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the purposes for which these lands are acquired or leased is for the cultivation of food, biofuel or fiber crops for export (Songwe and Deininger, 2009). LSLA is a phenomenon that has accelerated since the 2007–2008 global food price crises (De Schutter, 2009; Robertson and Pinstrup-Andersen, 2010; Songwe and Deininger, 2009). The key drivers of large-scale land investments (LSLIs) in sub-Saharan Africa may not necessarily be the same or at least not in the same magnitude as in other parts of the world. In a study of LSLA in Latin America and the Caribbean, Borras et al. (2012) identified four main initiatives that drive LSLA in this part of the world, which are food security initiatives, fuel security, climate change mitigation strategies and contemporary needs for new areas of investment of global capital. It is important to note that these initiatives do overlap with those identified in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia (Kugelman and Levenstein, 2009; Robertson and Pinstrup-Andersen, 2010). Borras et al. (2012) conclude that the likely outcome of these initiatives would be increased concentration of land and capital in the hands of a few a move away from the redistributive policies that have characterized recent land deconcentration reforms in this part of the world. Although the main drivers of LSLA may vary in different parts of the world, the processes involved in land acquisition tend to be remarkably similar. A study of such processes in Ghana, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia identified a striking similarity of procedures across national borders, notwithstanding the wide differences in legal and insti-

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tutional frameworks (German et al., 2011). A key feature of the outcome of LSLA processes is the marginalization of the rights of local land owners and users in rural regions of LSLI host countries (ActionAid, 2013; Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010) as well as their limited participation in the processes that will eventually determine the future directions of their lives and livelihoods (Robertson and Pinstrup-Andersen, 2010; Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010).

Although LSLA is a global phenomenon, a majority of the land deals that have been made over the last decade have been in sub-Saharan Africa (Anseeuw et al., 2012; Kugelman and Levenstein, 2009; Moore, 2011). The proliferation of LSLA in sub-Saharan Africa has been seen as a worrying phenomenon for many observers (Kugelman and Levenstein, 2009). The key reason for this concern is the understanding that sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where food insecurity remains persistent as a result of low productivity. Agriculture in this part of the world is predominately small-scale, characterized by low inputs and employing a majority of the population (especially in rural areas). Food production in many rural communities is supported by a farming system that depends substantially on fallowing to replenish soil fertility. Food and livelihood security for a vast majority of the population therefore depends on the abundance of land to support the fallow systems, characterized by low external input farming. LSLA, on the other hand, takes over prime rural agricultural lands, which are usually of good food-production quality, close to water sources (De Schutter, 2009), and heavily depended on by populations with few other alternative livelihoods.

Although sub-Saharan Africa has been described as a region with the greatest land potential for the expansion of agriculture, robust studies bringing together key variables of land use characteristics in the region to compute the amount of land available based on the farming patterns are scarce. Information, for example, on how much land is available, given the average farm size required to meet food security needs for individual countries, the lengths of fallow, demographic dynamics, or considering yield trends for major food and industrial crops of national importance or a host of other considerations, is scarcely available for any country in the region. Therefore, it is important not to take the contention of "available", "unused", "underused" land at face value. Resource-poor, smallholder farmers without formal land titles currently occupy much of the land sold in these transactions (Robertson and Pinstrup-Andersen, 2010). This threatens, among other things, local access to land-based resources, internal food security, rural livelihoods, local individual and political rights and the socio-political stability of states that host LSLIs (Oakland Institute, 2012b; Robertson and Pinstrup-Andersen, 2010; Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010). We posit that these non-agroecology correlates are not coincidental countries with particular characteristics (such as poor governance, higher levels of corruption and lower levels of education for the general population) tend to be more attractive for large-scale land investors than those with better levels of development among these and similar indicators (see Fig. 1).

Although research attention on the scale of LSLA as well as its implications on local communities and on the national governments that host them has been steadily gaining ground over the past several years, little attention has been directed toward understanding why some regions make for better targets for LSLA than others. In this paper, we ask the question: what are the factors that make communities vulnerable to an unequal engagement with large-scale land-investing interests in Sierra Leone? To explore this question, we begin by eliminating factors of agro-ecological suitability for biofuel crops. There are a number of reasons for this elimination. One reason is that for a majority of the developed countries where most of the LSLI companies originate, there is an agro-ecological potential (by way of arable land) for the production of biofuel crops (FAOSTAT, 2014). This is the case for six of the top ten investor countries the United States of America, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, India, Brazil and China. According to the Land Matrix Database, in 2015, Canada and the Russian Federation were among the list of top ten foreign large-scale land investors (The Land Matrix Global Observatory, 2015). These are also countries with ample potential to produce crops and biofuel feedstock within their national borders.

Table 1
Logistic regression table of awareness of transaction versus some key respondent individual variables (1 (event) = 279, 0 = 214).

					Odds	95% CI	
Predictor	Coef.	SE Coef.	Z	P	Ratio	Lower	Upper
Constant	−0.390898	0.638517	−0.61	0.540			
Age	0.0043314	0.0092881	0.47	0.641	1.00	0.99	1.02
Gender	−0.0522825	0.194075	−0.27	0.788	0.95	0.65	1.39
MAR_STAT	−0.211225	0.481151	−0.44	0.661	0.81	0.32	2.08
Educ_HUS	0.164255	0.166134	0.99	0.323	1.18	0.85	1.63
Educ_FEMA	0.437838	0.203599	2.15	0.032	1.55	1.04	2.31
NumYear_LOC	0.0558482	0.0096268	5.80	0.000	1.06	1.04	1.08
NumYear_AG	−0.0498940	0.0134414	−3.71	0.000	0.95	0.93	0.98

Log-likelihood = −313.796.
Test that all slopes are zero: $G = 47.256$, DF = 7, p-value = 0.000.

A closer examination of the UNDP (2014b) dataset (http://hdr.undp.org/en/data) also reveals that a majority of countries that host LSLIs tend to be countries where the levels of education for the general population are low and a host of other human development indicators, such as the Human Development Index (HDI) and levels of school attainment, are also low (see Fig. 1). In the same vein, when the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for countries that are sources of LSLIs is compared with those of target countries, the differences are significant (see Fig. 1). The top ten investor countries compared are the United States of America, Malaysia, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, India, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Brazil and China. The top ten target countries, on the other hand, are Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, the Republic of Congo, Brazil, Ukraine, Liberia and Sierra Leone (The Land Matrix Global Observatory, 2013). Although South Sudan is the third-largest target country for LSLIs, little data exists on the country's welfare indicators in the UNDP database (UNDP, 2014a).

Sierra Leone is one of six countries in sub-Saharan Africa involved in the project whose overall goal is to understand the outcomes of LSLA. Given the brutality and destruction suffered by Sierra Leone in its civil war, it can be expected that investments carried out by land-investing companies can be beneficial for the social and economic development of the country. Because of these factors, Sierra Leone was chosen as a case that can shed light on the importance of such investments for countries that have undergone severe socio-economic shock. ADDAX Bioenergy and SOCFIN Agricultural Company are some of the major large-scale investors in bioenergy feedstock in the country. These two companies are also interesting as cases because their operations are already more advanced than those of many other players in the sector hence, their impacts in communities (both positive and negative) are already being felt.

1.1. Socio-economic background

Sierra Leone is a relatively small country in West Africa. It is located between 6°55′N and 10°00′N (Fig. 2) and has a population of approximately six million inhabitants. It covers a total land area of approximately 72,325 km^2, and approximately 56% of the land is less than 150 m above sea level. The country has a diverse array of ecological regions, including forests on higher ground, savannah woodlands and grasslands in lowlands and inland valley swamps, riverine grasslands called 'bolilands', as well as mangrove swamps