



Constructing landscapes of value: Capitalist investment for the acquisition of marginal or unused land—The case of Tanzania



Andreas Exner^{a,*}, Lara E. Bartels^b, Markus Windhaber^c, Steffen Fritz^d, Linda See^d, Emilio Politti^a, Stephan Hochleithner^e

^a Environmental Consulting Ltd., Bahnhofstraße 39/2, 9020 Klagenfurt, Austria

^b Institute of Social Ecology Vienna, Alpen-Adria University (Klagenfurt-Vienna-Graz), Schottenfeldgasse 29, 1070 Vienna, Austria

^c Donaustraße 3, 3422 Greifenstein/Altenberg, Austria

^d Ecosystems Services & Management Program, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Schlossplatz 1, 2361 Laxenburg, Austria

^e Department of Geography, University of Zürich, Winterthurerstrasse 190, 8057 Zürich, Switzerland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 December 2013

Received in revised form

26 September 2014

Accepted 7 October 2014

Keywords:

Biofuels

Marginal land

Unused land

Land grab

Nature conservation

Tanzania

ABSTRACT

The current global wave of land acquisition – variously debated as land grabbing or investment in land – is promoted by the World Bank and the FAO as creating win–win-situations for local populations and investors alike. Common policy recommendations suggest expanding the production of export crops, by making use of marginal or unused land. Considerable potentials for such an expansion are assumed. Taking Tanzania as a case study, the evidence for such types of land is assessed by using a broad range of statistics. We will argue firstly, that the terms marginal and unused land serve as a manipulative terminology for the benefit of attempts to commercially valorize and commodify African landscapes, from biofuel to large-scale food production and tourism. However, they relate to different rationalities of domination. Unused land refers to a state-bureaucratic narrative, which excludes user groups deemed irrelevant for national development, while marginal land refers to a capitalist-economic narrative that excludes what is not profitable. Secondly, the terms are analyzed as categories central for state simplification of social relations attached to land. Modelling of these land use categories based on remote sensing is an attempt to compensate weak state capacities to enhance the legibility of the landscape by constructing it as a landscape of commercial value.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The assumption that areas not cultivated, but suitable for commercial agriculture exist has become one of the major arguments pro large scale agricultural investments in the discourse on land acquisition (Deininger, 2011). Yet, two problems concerning this argument have been indicated. Firstly, taking a closer look, one can differentiate two terms referring to land suitable for investments: “unused land” and “marginal land” (Nalepa and Bauer, 2012; Altvater and Geiger, 2010; Exner, 2011), whereby the notion of marginal land emerged mainly in the context of the biofuel discourse (Widengård, 2011). While these two terms obviously refer to different types of land, they very often lack a clear definition.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +43 0 69912723887.

E-mail addresses: andreas.exner@aon.at (A. Exner), lara@web-bartels.de (L.E. Bartels), markus.windhaber@ecopolicy-lab.org (M. Windhaber), fritz@iiasa.ac.at (S. Fritz), see@iiasa.ac.at (L. See), emiliopolitti@gmail.com (E. Politti), Stephan.Hochleithner@geo.uzh.ch (S. Hochleithner).

Even the very accurate study of Nalepa and Bauer (2012) (see e.g. p. 404) fails to clearly differentiate them.

Secondly, leaving the problem of finding an unambiguous definition of the terms aside, global assessments have not been able to provide conclusive evidence that land, which is effectively unused or marginal, exists to a significant amount (Nalepa and Bauer, 2012) or to the amount necessary to meet biofuel requirements set by current policy targets (Fritz et al., 2013).

Furthermore, in many African countries, nature conservation claims considerable swaths of land. Conflicts with local populations persist or arise in new projects to increase foreign exchange income, since nature conservation there often relies on the idea that land is not or hardly used or that it should in any case not be used for sustaining local livelihoods.

Two questions arise from this context: (1) which are the concepts and mechanisms embedded in the narratives of unused and marginal land, and (2) what are the sources and the quality of data, which serve to underpin these narratives?

To answer these questions, we will investigate the concepts of unused and marginal land in a specific geographical and

socio-economical context, drawing on cases from Tanzania. This country has been studied extensively regarding land use in general and specifically in regard to large scale agricultural investments and nature conservation (Ngoitiko et al., 2010; Matondi et al., 2011; Bartels, 2013; Exner, 2013).

The construction of marginal and unused land as narratives

Before discussing the possible extent of marginal and unused land, a distinction has to be made between the two terms, since they refer to different theoretical concepts and to different types of land. A circumstance ignored by some studies, which use the terms inaccurately or even synonymously (see Kachika, 2010; Cotula et al., 2008). The use of substitutes, like “idle land, degraded land, unproductive land, underutilized land, wasteland, reserve land” (Kachika, 2010: 22), “abandoned land”, “barren land” (Cotula et al., 2008: 21f), “sleeping land”, “set aside land” (The Gaya Foundation et al., 2008: 1, 5), contribute to a confusing inaccuracy. So far, there is no consensus on an unambiguous definition of marginal land or unused land. The complete lack of a definition in many approaches renders the application of these terms even more problematic, leaving the interpretation of the terms’ meaning more or less to the recipient. Although these circumstances create an interpretative uncertainty, it can be argued that the terms marginal and unused land evoke historically quite different patterns of meaning, which express different rationalities.

Drawing on existing definitions, two ascribed characteristics can be identified for marginal land: (1) marginal productivity (and therefore marginal economic return) due to biophysical constraints and, in some cases, (2) marginal use of the land, due to constraints, for instance, in access (also implying marginal returns).

The so called Gallagher Review, which focuses on indirect effects of biofuel production, gives an example for a definition of marginal land based on biophysical constraints: “Land unsuited for food production, e.g. with poor soils or harsh weather environments; and areas that have been degraded, e.g. through deforestation” (Renewable Fuels Agency, 2008: 33).

Interpreted under the perspective of early 20th century economic theory, as for example by Peterson and Galbraith (1932), the focus is being set on the notion of intensive and extensive margins:

“Assuming price response, these margins are extended with price increments roughly to the point where the extra production is barely remunerated and are similarly contracted with price diminution [clarifying that in] terms of physical grade of land the economic margin is at the ‘poorest’ land which can be ‘remuneratively’ operated ‘under given price, cost, and other conditions’” (1932: 296, emphasis in the original; see also Ellison, 1953).

Marginal land does not preclude agricultural uses and includes land that can be tilled economically to a certain degree if access is well developed via roads. Marginal land will indeed often be found as used at any given time. However, in the current discourse on marginal land, it is being assumed that the outer frontier of marginal land has expanded because of (1) increased demand for biofuels, which can (2) allegedly be produced with crops, which are, it is being suggested, more tolerant of unfavourable environmental conditions such as drought or poor soils than crops used for conventional purposes.¹ Because of these assumptions, land which was not marginal before, is often regarded as marginal land – thus this

“new” marginal land is the focus within the biofuel discourse. The current debate on marginal land is the reflection of changing economic incentives, where marginal land is a dynamic category, not a static classification of land. As a result of putting “new” marginal land into use, a net expansion of land used for crop production is assumed. Unused land, on the contrary, seems to be only characterized by purported “under-utilization”, while being arable under any circumstances (see more below).

Thus, the notion of marginality actually evokes two types of interpretation: the first one is closer to the economic principle of marginality, where marginal land is a shifting category depending on current technology, profit rates in capitalist agriculture and so on (Nalepa and Bauer, 2012); the second one alludes more to everyday language, in which marginal means peripheral. However, the notion of periphery is in itself ill-defined unless the benchmark of marginality (smallholder production, subsistence or industrial agriculture for national or world markets) or the centre to which periphery refers (the global North, the nearest city, the capital of a nation, an individual smallholder etc.) are given. Both aspects are interrelated, because peripheral regions are usually also regions with low profit rates or few opportunities for capitalist (i.e. profitable) investment.

As already mentioned, the notions of unused and marginal land differ largely, if the whole range of meanings is taken into account. The principle of marginality in a capitalist sense introduces a specific economic rationality for assessing land, ignoring actual forms of use. The term unused land, on the contrary, implies the physical absence of use or the absence of significant use and, thus, users, where the land is regarded as being definitively arable.

In an African context, the notion of unused land is tightly connected to colonial visions of “landscapes” embodying “wilderness” (Neumann, 1998). What was interpreted as “wilderness” by colonial officers and conservationists, i.e. as land not used by humans, very often actually was a cultural landscape, crucially important for local livelihoods (Neumann, 1998; Kjekshus, 1977; see contributions in Maddox et al., 1996).

The notion of unused land thus has a strong relationship to discourses and practices of nature conservation, which are an important form of land grabbing in Tanzania, mainly affecting pastoralists (Bartels, 2013). Also, the category of unused land is prominently featured in Tanzanian land use regulation, as – according to the Land Act (URT, 1999b) – unused land automatically becomes state land, i.e. does not fall into the administration of the villages. On the other hand, the practice of using of land – in a quite broadly conceived manner – defines it as village land according to the Village Land Act (URT, 1999a). This contradiction between Tanzania’s two main land regulations has been pointed out by several authors (e.g. Olenasha s.d.). It is highly problematic since the state – as hierarchical superior institution – might declare land in use as being unused land, which entails the danger of land grabbing. In Tanzania, the state is the main agent enacting the discourse of unused land.² State projects require a differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate uses, between those that should be discarded and replaced, and others, which should be furthered and expanded. The rationality for this type of distinction is not specifically profit, but state revenue in particular.

The notion of marginal land, on the other hand, is rather applied within international discourses on biofuels and agricultural investment, and by the main institutions of these discourses such as the World Bank (2010), the FAO (Maltsoglou and Khwaja, 2010) or

¹ This is especially the case in regard of *Jatropha curcas*, as suggested for instance by Maltsoglou and Khwaja (2010), though it is also warned that “evidence for the long-term viability of *jatropha* is largely absent” (Maltsoglou and Khwaja, 2010: 16; see also literature cited in Romijn and Caniels, 2010).

² This is not to say that the term “unused land” is not used by private investors or within the biofuel discourse. However, the narrative of marginal land is closely coupled with private investment in biofuels, at least concerning Tanzania (Widengård, 2011).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6548495>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6548495>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)