

The Political Economy of Land Governance in Africa

[Short Course](#)

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Commodification of the Commons in the Transition to Neoliberalism

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Ownership of land is traditionally presented as a bundle of rights. Embedded in it is the right to control, possess, use and dispose of land. It provides the right to exclude others from that piece of land, the right to make others work the land, and the right to reap fruits and resources from the land. Traditionally, ownership of land is understood as a relationship between a person and an object (the land). This is however not the case, land ownership shows the relationship between person and person. At the end of the day, **ownership is a power relation.**

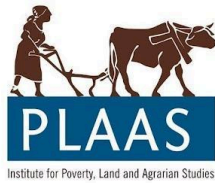
The concept 'property' is **historically and socially constructed**. Nature does not give land in the form of property. Rather, land is demarcated, mapped and given to people. Land is allotted to a person after it is demarcated. The person [or entity] then owns the land in perpetuity (title) or for a certain number of years (lease).

How is the land which is demarcated obtained in the first place? This is a historical process rooted in multiple forms of violence including robbery,

invasion, eviction, military force, etc. This process of violently obtaining land is what in political economy is referred to as primitive accumulation. The original land grabbing was under colonialism. Colonists established a monopoly over the land, dispossessing people of their land and enclosing the commons. This meant property for the few, and landlessness for the many. States play an important role in the monopoly of violence - it is not simply an economic process, but also a political process.

Property becomes a commodity through **individualisation, titling and registration** (through the state), which makes it **marketable and transferable**. This process is partially or wholly dependent on each contextually-specific space and time. Proj Shivji used the history of land tenure in Tanzania as a case study. Unlike a settler colony, where land is vested in the monarch with freehold tenure (of the most fertile lands) for settlers, Tanzania's system of rights of occupancy created a contractual relationship between the state and plantation companies, which persisted long after independence. Colonial powers developed mechanisms to occupy and exploit the resources of the colonies, as well as their labour power. This was not only a question of land, but also a question of labour power. **The market is often a mechanism through which the rich become richer and the poor become poorer.** Those who trade on the market are socially unequal, with the market acting as the greatest divide and source of inequality.

Commons refer to land and resources that are for common use for the people who reside there, and not owned by individual bodies. In pre-colonial Africa, land and other resources were considered common goods for the use of the community, being used by people in the common. This generally meant land and resources were protected and preserved, rather than overused. There was an equilibrium between humanity and nature, unlike under



capitalist systems where land and resources are ruthlessly plundered. Communities were custodians of land with deep ancestral connections to the land. It is important not to romanticise or over-generalise the pre-colonial system, but this is true for most African societies.

Independent African governments inherited disarticulated economies based on monoculture, raw material export, cheap and partially forced labor, patriarchal labor division (with women subsidising capital), backward agriculture, rural-urban division, external integration with metropolitan economies, and small producers as the main surplus producers. The result was a lack of congruence between the site of surplus production and the site of accumulation, exploitation and persistent primitive accumulation exploitation, and a destroyed ability for food self-sufficiency. This is the story of development and underdevelopment we so often hear. There was largely a failure by African countries to address and resolve the twin questions inherited from colonialism - the land question and the food question.

Under neoliberalism, the appropriation of the commons has continued, at a greater speed than ever before. It is primitive accumulation par excellence in the classical sense of the word. Land and other resources are being grabbed for the production of food and fuel (bio-fuels). Promises are made to communities that they will benefit from making their land available for land investment but those rarely reap any benefits. Conservation projects keep communities away from resources they need for their livelihoods. Forests are also captured for timber production and carbon credits. Where smallholder farmers still have access to land, their production activities are being controlled through seed and other inputs dependency. This results in displacement of communities and poor access to food and other natural resources that were

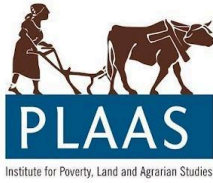
otherwise available to communities at large. The privatisation and commodification of the 'New Commons' under neoliberalism, sees the marketisation of public goods (including money/finance, water, energy, health, etc). This has been coupled with state withdrawal in many countries, outsourcing traditional government functions. There are huge ecological and human consequences of the privatisation and commodification of the commons. The commons must be reclaimed and reconstructed through a **paradigmatic shift from Ownership to Control, Regulation & Management (CR&M)**. This can be done by and through democratic organs of the Working People at various levels.

We must shift our internalized concept of individual ownership and rethink ownership itself. Embracing new ideas will face resistance, reflecting the bifurcation in our society, where social groups and classes have developed but large masses remain untouched. Reclaiming the commons will resonate with the masses but less so with smaller groups, leading to a class struggle. Status quo systems thrive on the belief that things have always been this way, but societies do change. We must start with what we are best at - ideas. We have to generate and disseminate fundamentally different ideas, even if they aren't immediately accepted, to break the ivory towers and reach the people. We need to show the plunder and devastation that capitalism has caused to help advance these ideas.

"Make commons a category of common language"

Discussion & Spotlight

- *To claim and or to reconstitute the commons would be a step backward from progress and modernisation. Do you agree? Why?*
- *To reclaim or reconstitute the commons is not a viable political strategy because,*



among other things, it has the potential of invoking a demand for traditional authorities? Do you agree? If yes, how can that danger be avoided?

Ikanyeng Gaodirelwe (Botswana): Commoning addresses social inequalities such as poverty, joblessness, and landlessness, and can also address historical injustices and enhance social cohesion.

Akibu Abdulai (Ghana): There is a need for reclaiming the commons, especially in contexts where post-independence governments have continued to dissipate the commons. Customary leadership across Africa must begin to awaken to the reality that there needs to be a resurgence of the commons against the state and individualistic ownership.

Carolyn Tumuhimbise (Uganda): If we return to the commons, we can have a much better relationship between people and the land. It can help us restore customs, culture, values and norms. It would also mean food security is guaranteed. It is possible to reclaim the commons, but there are governance and ideological issues.

Charles Kofi Menlah (Ghana): Modernisation is an imposition on Africa, and has brought about separation among us through individualism. This is what is making us lose our 'oneness'. Going back to the commons is a more sustainable approach.

Quotable from Zoom Chat:

Zulfatu Umar Faruk (Nigeria): "For us to make commons a category of common language we can consider the introduction of the concept of commons in school and university curricula across various disciplines (environmental science, economics, sociology, etc.). Create a mindset shift".

Elvis Munetsi (Zimbabwe): "It is important to strike a balance between respecting cultural heritage and promoting modern governance practices. By carefully considering these factors, it is possible to reclaim or reconstitute the commons without inadvertently strengthening traditional authority structures".

Food Systems and Land Governance in Africa

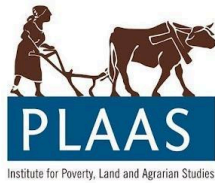
[Prof Mamadou Goita](#)

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The relationship between food systems and land governance in Africa is intricate and significantly impacts agricultural production & productivity, food security & sovereignty, and socio-economic development. It leads to exploring the current state of food systems and land governance in identifying challenges, opportunities & perspectives. The dynamic relationship between food systems and land governance in Africa, focusing on how land ownership, agricultural practices, and policy influence food security and sustainability. In Africa, food systems are not only crucial for sustenance but also integral to the economic fabric and cultural heritage of its people. Traditional and modern agricultural practices, land tenure systems, and legal frameworks interact to shape the agricultural and food landscape.

Prof Goita began by providing important conceptual clarifications. **Food system** refers to the entire food value chain, from production to processing to distribution to consumption and recycling. A **sustainable food system** is a **territorial collaboration network** that integrates production, conservation/storage, processing (often women and



youth), distribution/markets, consumption of food products and the management of residual materials. This is a network and power relationship analysis that aims to increase the environmental, economic and social health of the collectivities and the community. It includes actors and the relationships between them, activities and infrastructures involved in the food and health security/sovereignty of a population and is based on territorial food governance (linked to culture, practices & policies). **Food self-sufficiency** means all food consumed is produced within the country/territory - producing enough to feed its population. Food self-sufficiency does not mean food security.

Food security is defined as, “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO). There are 4 common pillars: availability, access, utilization, and stability. There are however still missing pieces of the puzzle. 2 key missing pieces are: agency and sustainability. **Agency** “refers to the capacity of individuals and groups to exercise a degree of control over their own circumstances and to provide meaningful input into governance processes, is widely seen today as an important aspect of addressing widening inequities within food systems, including imbalances of power among actors within those systems” (Clap, 2022). There are now 6 pillars, but there still exists problems due to unclear power relations in the food system. Where the food is coming from is not clear. Food sovereignty is a dynamic process and political commitment.

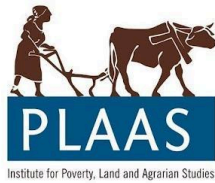
Food Sovereignty emerged as a response and alternative to the neoliberal model of corporate globalization. As such, it is Internationalist in character and provides a framework for understanding and transforming international

governance around food and agriculture. It emphasises people's right to decide the food you want to eat and the way you want to produce this food. Food sovereignty is different from food security in both approach and politics. Food security does not distinguish where food comes from, or the conditions under which it is produced and distributed. National food security targets are often met by sourcing food produced under

The six principles of food sovereignty are: focusing on food for people, valuing food providers, localizing food systems, putting control locally by placing territory, land, water, and other resources in the hands of local food providers and respecting their rights, building knowledge and skills, and working with nature by utilizing diverse, low external input agroecological methods to maximize ecosystem contributions and enhance resilience and adaptation, particularly in response to climate change.

Land governance in Africa deals with the rules, processes, and structures through which land rights are allocated, managed, and transacted. Effective land governance is crucial for food sovereignty/security, environmental sustainability, and economic stability of African countries. In implementing land tenure regularization programs it can contribute to improve land access for women and increase investment in land due to secure access to resources. This would allow conditions for a new sustainable food system to arise.

African food systems are diverse, encompassing family farming systems (most), traditional small-scale farming, pastoralism, fishing, and modern agribusiness. These systems are influenced by climate conditions, cultural practices, policies, and economic demand. The sustainability of a food system will depend on the linkages made between sustainable food system governance and land



governance. **These linkages are also important in the self-determination of African countries.**

Sustainable food systems are based on transparent and inclusive governance. It is about bringing together the driving forces of the community around clear and shared values on resources and their management. These values can vary, but generally include: health, equity (inter and intra generational), accessibility (physical and economic), proximity (geographical and relational), protection of the environment, support for local and regional economies, and self-determination.

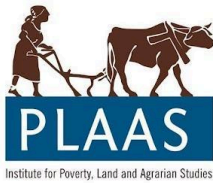
Several challenges hinder the effectiveness of food systems and land governance in Africa. The growing influence of corporate actors in food governance raises important concerns that matter for the public good. First, it can undermine principles of inclusivity, fairness, and transparency in governance processes. Second, it can lead to weak and ineffective outcomes of governance initiatives. And third, it can result in a lack of corporate accountability, especially to those who are most affected by the actions of large and powerful corporations, and the impacts of the industrial food system on people and the planet. Other challenges include; Fragmented Land Holdings that hinder efficient agricultural practices and limit economies of scale; land tenure insecurity that impacts investments across sectors; climate change's adverse effect on food production (particularly in drought-prone areas); and the use of non-sustainable farming techniques.

There are several opportunities to enhance both food systems and land governance: implementing comprehensive progressive land reforms to provide secure land rights; raising awareness of multiple crises such as food crises, pandemics, and wars that may occur in the next 15 years; encouraging sustainable production practices, such as agroecology as a science, practice, and movement,

to preserve the environment while enhancing food production; and developing policy and regulatory frameworks that support fair land distribution and encourage investment in agriculture, fishing, and pastoralism to address these challenges effectively.

With countries across the continent facing increased economic and climate stresses, urgent measures are needed to build greater adaptive capacity and resilience into Africa's food systems. This will require interventions across the value chain, such as the scaling of investments into farm and transport infrastructure, the scaling of sustainable farming practices like Agroecological approaches, support for the formalization of territorial markets, and support for improved competition regulation. There is also a need for effective management of food systems and land governance in Africa that holds the key to resolving many of the continent's challenges related to agriculture and food security/sovereignty. Addressing issues such as land tenure security, embracing sustainable technological advancements, and promoting sustainable practices can transform the agricultural landscape of our continent. The ongoing efforts in land reform and agricultural enhancement need continuous support and adaptation to local contexts to ensure long-term sustainability and equitable growth in Africa's food systems.

We desperately need a new recipe for addressing hunger. Instead of relying on volatile global markets to feed people, there is a need to rebuild countries' capacity to produce nutritious food for their own people. Land reform is instrumental to this production system. We need more diverse and resilient food systems to better withstand shocks. We need urgent debt relief for poorer countries. We must learn from countries that have eradicated hunger - they did this through social protection schemes that guarantee food access for the poorest people, while supporting farmers, fisherfolks,



pastoralists, rural workers and local sustainable territorial food markets.

Discussion & Spotlight

- *What concrete actions can be implemented in your countries supporting women and youth to contribute more in the achievement of sustainable food systems in Africa? Formulate 1 key recommendation for states to take action!*
- *What are the key lock-ins (constraints) blocking the achievement of food sovereignty in your countries and/or your regions? Why?*
- *What are the 3 top reforms that are needed in your countries to realize sustainable food systems transformation ?*

Poloko Mokbocho (Lesotho): We need to give skills and leadership training to women and youth to overcome issues, particularly in the agricultural sector. Food sovereignty is being constrained by climate change, a shortage of land to produce, and a lack of political will.

Abel Molla (Ethiopia): The 3 top reforms that are needed include; land tenure reform; promoting equitable land distribution (particularly for women and youth); and changing the perceptions of agriculture among the youth.

Comfort Naadu Nartey (Ghana): The government needs to invest more in training women and youth in agriculture, in addition to providing necessary technology and machinery and capacity training. If we want nature to survive and grow, we need to focus on empowering the youth.

Hazel Tariro Chimbiro (Zimbabwe): The main constraints to food sovereignty include land tenure insecurity, climate change, and extreme violence/terrorism (in conflict zones).

Quotable from Zoom Chat:

Carolyn Tumuhimbise (Uganda): “I think we need to adopt some cultures like the acts of teaching during fire places, so that agriculture lessons are being shared at the household level right from the seeds so that the youth appreciate right from a young level then they will know their contribution rather than thinking agriculture is for the village”.

Large-Scale Acquisitions and Land Grabbing in Africa

[Prof Ruth Hall](#) & [Dr Boaventura Monjane](#)

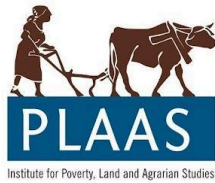
University of the Western Cape - Institute for Poverty, Land, and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS)



What is land grabbing? Land grabbing ‘suggests unilateral appropriation of land’ (Cotula 2013:11). It is not



necessarily illegal. Large-scale land acquisition (LSLA) involves contracts and leases, often signed by the government and in most cases consistent with national laws. This definition is not static, but is rather to open-up conversations on the topic. The choice of employing the term ‘land grabbing’ or ‘large scale land acquisition’ is deeply political. The words that we choose to use, and the definitions we adopt, hold a lot of political meaning and have implications for interpretations and responses. African scholars particularly have really endorsed the language of ‘grabbing’ rather than ‘acquisition’



Broadly speaking, LSLA is the acquisition of land over 200 hectares. All acquisitions and definitions are context specific (200 hectares may be relatively large or small based on where you are based). These acquisitions may include concessions, long-term leases, purchase or any other means provided for within national frameworks. There are 3 features of 'contemporary' large scale land acquisition including the transfer of property rights in terms of right to access, use, control, and own land.

LSLA has many different types of actors and purposes. It may be straightforward private-private purchases and/or public-private leases. These have primarily been for 'flex crops' for food, feed, and agro-fuels. These also involve plantations and acquisitions of large parcels of land for conservation and carbon sequestration. In addition it may also be for mining of natural resources and in some cases for purposes of land speculation.

The grabbing of land across the world has been a primary way land has been privatised and commodified. When we speak about it in a policy context, we are more speaking about a recent phase where there has been rapid land acquisition across the African continent. The years 2007-2009 was a peak in land grabbing/LSLA debates. This was the time of massive global financial crises, a global spike in the prices of food, and a rapid increase in the demand for renewable fuels. In fact, we must situate LSLA in three phases: initially in Southern Africa, Kenya, and Western Africa in the 1960s; then in the 1990s, driven by local elites, retiring middle class, and civil servants during SAPs, changing the rural landscape; and finally, around 2007 although it started around the millennium. It was clear that a new phenomenon was emerging, not seen since the rise of colonialism - a new scramble for Africa.

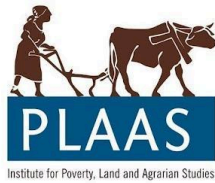
The online [land matrix](#) resource was presented as a useful database tracking all major land acquisitions

around the world (over 200 hectares). This is regardless of whether there has been consent or not. It is not necessarily talking about a large number of deals, but rather a very large area of land. There are a variety of deals at different scales including: intended, concluded, and failed (these are often bigger projects that are highly speculative) land grabs.

Why has Africa been at the center of land grabs globally? The World Bank is a key actor here, presenting African land as unused and available, referring to the "Guinea-Savannah" zone as "vast under-utilised land reserve". This is using the same ideologies and arguments that underpinned how colonial property systems were brought into Africa - ignoring the existence of already existing tenure, access and land use. Furthermore, unlike many other regions in the world, the vast majority of people on this continent hold land under customary tenure, generally unrecognised by the state and investors. The core problem then is that customary rights aren't being recognised as 'real property'.

"Remedy lies in... legal acknowledgement that customary and other longstanding unregistered land tenancy amounts to a real property interest, registered or not... Without this change, majority rural landholders remain little better than squatters on their own land, a condition already wrongfully endured for a century or more... While hardly new, the current wave of state... backed leasing hardens an already dangerous dichotomy between the interests of governments and their people" (Alden Wily 2010: 1).

The wave of LSLA/Land Grabs are prompting significant changes in how land is used. These include; food to food; food to biofuels; food to nonfood; nonfood to food; nonfood to biofuels; and nonfood to nonfood. We cannot assume LSLA are necessary for food production. Broad depiction of



some of the major large scale investments in Southern Africa see expansions in areas of mining, sugar production, energy initiatives, and forestry. There are different models through which these land deals are happening. The most common form of land-based investments involves mostly companies and/or a few individuals acquiring land rights through long-term leases or concessions. Another form of land-based investment involves a variety of arrangements with small-scale producers. Short and medium-term leases indicate a structural change in economies and societies, often using the language of good governance to dispossess the peasantry under the guise of responsibility. **LSLA remain contested because it causes displacement of the rural poor in different parts of Africa.**

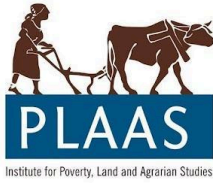
What have we found? What we see here is the revival of some older models of agriculture, originally brought in by colonialism and original developmental models. In some cases, big land deals are in the same place where colonial estates used to be. Another implication is the expansion of dualistic land and agrarian sectors. In some cases there is a very clear dispossession, but many of these land deals include partial dispossession (often through an enclosure of the commons). In these cases, marginalised groups tend to lose out more. There exist huge debates on the role of traditional and state authorities in trying to negotiate and profit from land grabs. Over the last 15 years there have been many changes including the biofuels 'boom and bust' in Africa, shifts in commodity prices and global narratives of food scarcity, and agroecological and infrastructure constraints. A lot of the debates about land grabbing and control over rural territory has been central to the rise of authoritarian regimes across the world. Also, in response, there have been a range of reactions from violence resistance to people trying to leverage better deals.

One of the drivers of LSLA/Land grabbing is the development of corridors. The ideas of corridors often goes uncriticised and unchallenged. These are generally geographical areas of a country that are usually surrounded by major transport routes that facilitate economic activities. There are usually developed in areas with already established infrastructural systems. This has been a major driver of LSLA/land grabbing across the continent. Others speak of synthetic resource grabbing, including not only farmlands but also big conservation projects, dams, irrigation systems, biofuels production, and ecotourism. The drivers of development corridors are generally private sector actors, governments, and donors and international finance institutions. Dr Monjane provided the example of the Nacala Corridor: ProSAVANA programme in Mozambique.

The purpose of this session was to instigate, and get people thinking about these issues of land grabbing/LSLA from a critical point of view to try to truly understand the dynamics underway in broader processes of agrarian change. The big players continue to be global capital, without whom land grabbing would not be possible. We must also remember that the state is multifaceted, not monolithic, and deeply embedded in class struggles within society. We need to move beyond a moral question to investigate structural questions of who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? And what do they do with it. In this wave of land grabbing, the perception of land in Africa has shifted towards being a route to enrichment, resulting in incredibly uneven power relations. We need to ask: How does power and control over resources shift?

Discussion & Spotlight

- *Are large-scale land deals happening in your country? If so, who are the actors, what are their interests, and what are the mechanisms through which they have been getting land?*



- *Are these deals leading to land use changes? Who are the winners and losers?*
- *How are people responding?*

Chenayi Mhangagwa (Zimbabwe): Common across all our discussions is that governments are critical players in land grabs and help facilitate these grabs. These grabs are largely for the large scale industrial developments, mining, commercial agriculture (primarily for exports), and tourism. This is often at the expense of communities, dispossessed from their lands and livelihoods.

Rebecca Chepkemboi (Kenya): With examples from South Africa, Tanzania, Botswana, Kenya, and Ghana, the answer was a resounding yes that land grabbing is happening. This is often done under the guise of employment opportunities for local people (that rarely materialise).

Ngadi Edjienguele Sylvie (Cameroon): People are responding in a lot of ways and are demanding accountability. We are also seeing a big rise in rural women's movements across the continent as a response.

Quotable from Zoom Chat:

Godiramang Motlhagodi (Botswana): "Simple to say African Countries need "independence" again".

Carolyne Tumuhimbise (Uganda): "Looking at land in a broad aspect that is the economic loss, social loss, environmental loss, spiritual loss among others helps to deeply think beyond this large scale land acquisition".

Ter Manyang Gatwech (Sudan): "I am now an expert in Political Economy and Land Governance in Africa. As a vocal human rights defender in South Sudan, I have gained the knowledge to advocate for land reforms in my country. I have reached out to

Professors from the University of Western Cape to collaborate with the University of Juba on these reforms. Thank you for sharing your valuable knowledge with us".

Please note that this newsletter is not an official or approved record of the lectures or discussion in the course. It is compiled by a PLAAS team.