

Liberation and the looting of African land

by [Matt Meyer](#) | March 14, 2012



Illustration by Robin Heighway-Bury/Thorogood.net

Despite decades of anti-colonial civilian resistance in Africa, a pernicious movement of land acquisition is overtaking the continent at a rate unprecedented since the conquests of the 19th Century. In a low-profile manner, significantly more than 125 million acres of land—more than double the size of Britain—has been sold to wealthy investors or foreign governments since 2010. With China and India leading the list of national purchasers, and Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan amongst the leading multinational corporate plunderers, the countries most affected by recent sales include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. [Oxfam International has reported](#) that, in some cases, land has been sold for less than forty cents an acre.

Concern about this dangerous trend has begun to lead to nonviolent action on the regional and grassroots level. Within the [United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the African Union](#), a July 2009 Heads of State meeting held in Sirte, Libya, under the leadership of Muammar Gaddafi set forth a framework for land policy throughout the continent.

“Comprehensive, people-driven land policies and reforms,” they wrote, must be developed and adhered to, such that “full political, social, economic and environmental benefits” go to “the

majority of the African people.” The problem is, at a governmental level, presidents and prime ministers presiding over widely different economic systems have shown strikingly similar unwillingness to implement policies for the good of the people.

As International Land Coalition program manager Michael Taylor wrote in his foreword to *The Struggle for Land in Africa*, the newly regulated, partitioned and “enclosed” land must become “less of a vehicle for the concentration of land ownership and more of an opportunity for those that use the land—women, family farmers, pastoralists, first peoples, tenants, and the landless.” The historic nature of enclosures and economic liberalism, however—as pointed out by [Ousseina Alidou](#), [Silvia Federici](#) and others—rarely allows for that type of social progress. “Globalization” and globalized land acquisition in Africa, like the strings-always-attached “foreign aid,” and “colonialism” a generation before have become the dirty words of a continent.

Even in the country with what many have called the best land law in Africa and with one of the strongest traditions of people-centered government, the limitations of state-directed reform has been striking. Mozambique’s 1997 Land Law, which struggled to balance the need for investment with both traditional pastoral land-use histories and the socialist history of state land ownership, has had a patchy implementation record. And while large areas of land are still controlled by local communities, the process of concentrated land grabbing has been cautiously described as “not yet irreversible.”

International authorities have fared no better and often worse—sometimes due to their own negligence. The infamously divisive practices of the U.N. Mission in the Congo (MONUC) led researcher Thierry Vircoulon to correctly generalize (in another contribution to *The Struggle for Land*) that peacekeepers of all varieties must always be aware of the complexities and underlying tensions regarding land issues in every conflict situation. In the aptly-titled essay “When Armed Groups have a Land Policy and Peacemakers Do Not,” Vircoulon underscores the vital point that land tenure for “average citizens” is synonymous with securing lasting peace.

Though organizing on a mass scale has not yet been part of the grassroots agenda in the Congo, activist Jacques Depelchin of the Otabenga Alliance asserts that “there are signs of revolt of ordinary people against many decades of oppression and dispossession.” Depelchin suggests that a new wave of revolutionary consciousness is on the horizon and ponders what it would take for true justice to emerge. Though not writing explicitly about nonviolent solutions, his queries strike to the heart of the dynamic which underlies most of the violence on the continent and beyond. “When will the rich understand,” Depelchin asks:

that at the origin of their wealth, crimes against humanity were committed? ... When will a fair and true dialogue between the rich and the poor looking to abandon the hierarchy dictated by the rich begin? Only then will the healing of crimes against humanity begin.

In the West African country of Mali, an extraordinary series of meetings and dialogues culminated in an international gathering of peasants, pastoralists, and indigenous peoples on November 19, 2011, forming the [Global Alliance Against Land-Grabbing](#). The final resolution of that gathering offered an interesting challenge to the role of the nation-state itself, noting that the post-independence government of Mali had only been around since 1960. How, they asked, could a state barely 50 years old proclaim sovereignty and legitimate power over local communities which have lived on the same land for many generations? “Clearly these nation-states of recent vintage and troubled tenure,” noted activist-scholar Abena Ampofoa Asare, “ignore the political fallout of land grabs at their own peril.”

Another grassroots initiative with broad regional and international potential is the campaign [Stop Africa Land Grab](#). Founded by Nigerian businessman Dr. Emeka Akaezuwa, the U.S.-based movement is fueled by great concern throughout the Diaspora. Their methods have included a petition drive opposing the unfolding “tragedy of epic proportions,” as well as educational and consciousness-raising efforts. Along similar lines, former TransAfrica director and Black Commentator columnist Bill Fletcher, Jr. is calling for a re-conceptualization of the “global African worker” as the focus of new efforts for change. Like the organizers in Mali, Fletcher suggests that the land grab is symptomatic of an economic moment characterized by the restructuring of capitalism away from nation-based centers of struggle. The national liberation movement mentality of the past must now give way to a 21st-century Pan-Africanism which is committed not simply to continental unification, but to economic justice for all.

The new African land grab is nothing short of a direct re-colonization of land and people who have already suffered unprecedented theft, exploitation and oppression. A new movement is also in the making; Fletcher correctly demands that in order for this movement to achieve truly liberating success, it must “not only address race, gender, and class, but it must be centered on the needs and struggles of the worker.”



Posted under [Africa](#), [Corporations](#), [Land rights](#)

3 Comments

1. **Matt Meyer** says:

[March 18, 2012 at 10:47 am](#)

Postscript: In an article where I proudly cite and link to several important sources, I neglected to do so for one of the places most important for scholars and activists of contemporary African Affairs: the consistently wonderful and vital Pambazuka News. Pambazuka (<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/>) is nothing short of essential if one is committed to social justice in these modern times. Much more than simply a news agency covering the African continent, its contributors provide perspectives on the world today, and how we can change it for the better. For more information, and a more complete analysis of the ideas noted here by Abena Ampofoa Asare, please see: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/79569/print>; for more of the incomparable work of Bill Fletcher, see: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/77812/print>

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2. **Hannah** says:

[March 18, 2012 at 1:46 pm](#)

This was a fantastic article, but I urge caution.

While we are “against” land grabs, we must ensure that we’re not trying to forestall or demonize investment on-the-whole. These states, after-all, have been starved of investment for decades, under widespread perceptions that Africa is “too dangerous” a place to conduct business (owing to a more longstanding narrative that casts Africa in shadowy, unfortunate terms). Responsible investment, though difficult to ensure, is better than chronic dependency on food aid and foreign largesse. And while the way in which it is currently being conducted will not engender significant social benefits without proper regulatory mechanisms in place, calling it “neocolonialism” obscures the fact that it is often ruling elites who are using (and tweaking) neoliberal policies to position themselves to gain from the investments. Any well-meaning investor who does not understand the process of consultations and leasing land may unknowingly obtain a parcel of land that was signed off by a district official “acting on behalf of the community”, while he may be, in actuality, an appendage of a larger patronage network with no connection to the community he “represents”. When we say “neocolonial”, we should instead say “neoliberal”. When we decry investments, we denounce them because it is predatory governments (or elite factions) that are not being responsible to their own citizens.

While I was in Mozambique this past summer conducting fieldwork on the issue, I found that many subsistence farmers (selling what surplus they had in the Beira marketplace) were actually very positive about the prospect of foreign companies taking over state farm projects now in shambles or launching biofuels/food crop plantations that would afford Mozambicans better jobs. They want more investment! This sentiment was echoed last night by an Ethiopian doctor I met at a conference. Nobody had caught wind of land conflicts. Consultations and compensation

were enforced (in Mozambique, at least). The real issue is that the government privileges foreign investors' access to credit and to land, while not empowering its own farmers and their cooperatives to obtain land titles, access loans and other inputs, etc. If investment in local producers coincided with foreign commercial ag investments, a truly innovative food security strategy would emerge.

As activists, I think (in the vein of James Ferguson's work) that we need to pool energy and resources for those farmer's associations, cooperatives, and NGOs that are using the new "marketized" or "neoliberalized" terrain to organize farmers to benefit from changing policies. We need to recognize forms of governance emerging in the absence of states that are receding from social programs and expenditure in the name of the "free market". Obviously, I am only familiar with Mozambique and Ethiopia (to a lesser extent), but on the whole, being only "against" the issue does not offer viable alternatives for action.

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3. **Matt Meyer** says:

[March 18, 2012 at 2:51 pm](#)

Hannah raises some vital points here, worthy of further discussion. I would suggest that we do need to be against the process of land grab cited in my piece and others, but the process of land grab as defined here and elsewhere is not, as Hannah poignantly notes, the same thing as investment. Any investment, in Africa and elsewhere, must be done with utmost sensitivity, and these are issues which Hannah begins to bring up.

That said, I am also of the belief, only alluded to in this piece, that Mozambique in many ways provides a special case. Since the publication of this article only days ago, I have been in touch with some colleagues in Mozambique about a spotlight of these and related issues in their country. I hope and expect that we will be seeing more on this in coming weeks on the pages of Waging Nonviolence.