

Some introductory remarks on the theme of the Seminar on Large-scale versus Small-scale Agricultural Development in Africa

In Africa, large-scale farming has been practiced widely throughout the colonial history for the sake food production and for the production of specific cash crop (plantation agriculture, Kitale Highlands (Kenia), Zimbabwe, etc.).

For political reasons, in the post-colonial era the area under large-scale agriculture has gradually, or in some cases less gradually, been decreased.

However, since a few years, large-scale farming is back.

Prompted by fears for persistent food shortages within the developing world and newfound economic opportunities for (mostly foreign) agricultural investors and speculators, the food price crisis of 2007/08 caused a dramatic increase in large-scale agricultural investments for the production of food and biofuels.

Nowadays, most land acquisitions take place in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Initially, this development has been welcomed as a new road towards agricultural development, but rather soon it prompted criticism of a large number of NGO's, governmental, and multinational organizations, because of various negative impacts on local communities. These protests have to be taken seriously, because for the rural poor the most important asset is land. Without access to land, they are at great risk of being exploited. This, in turn, may in due time trigger social unrest and disturbance, which may create great risks for the governments and for the (foreign) investors concerned.

On the African continent, hundreds of thousands of poor farmers lack legal rights to the land they cultivate. Increasingly, many of them are at risk of losing their land due to the recent upturn in land acquisitions by private sector interests and seizures by governments. Most of these farmland acquisitions take place in low- and middle-income countries, where land property rights are weak or non-existent.

A few facts may illustrate the importance of the new trend in large-scale agriculture:

- Recently, at least 2.5 million hectares of land have already been acquired in just five African countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali, and Sudan (IIED, London).
- In the next few years, the Ethiopian government plans to make some 3 million hectares of land available to investors. This is about 20 percent of the total land area currently under cultivation in the country.
- Some countries, including Madagascar and Mozambique have received requests from investors for more than half of their total cultivable land area.

The problem is that Governments of these countries just think that they can do what they want, because mostly land laws are lacking.

Local communities often have their own unwritten customary law that determines ownership or use. Under these traditional laws, entire communities have farmed land for generations, but their rights to occupy and use the land may not be formally recognized by statutory law. This lacuna and the lack of legislation on labour relations, minimum wages, and the like, make the rural poor very vulnerable to exploitation.

This problem will be illustrated by a few – good and bad - examples of large-scale farming in Ethiopia.