Land Grabbing and Food Sovereignty

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — The new scramble for African land

The New Scramble for African Land

Since approximately 2008, Africa has experienced what scholars and journalists call a 'new scramble for African land' — a wave of large-scale foreign acquisition of African agricultural land that bears disturbing structural similarities to the original Scramble for Africa examined earlier in this course. Foreign governments — particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, South Korea, China, and India — and foreign corporations have acquired tens of millions of hectares of African agricultural land, primarily to grow food and biofuels for export to their home countries.

The scale is staggering. The Land Matrix Initiative, an academic consortium tracking large-scale land acquisitions globally, has documented deals covering over forty million hectares of African land — an area larger than Germany. The actual figure, including deals not publicly reported, is believed to be significantly larger. Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Sudan, Madagascar, and several other countries have been particularly affected.

The standard justification offered by both acquiring parties and host governments is that the deals bring investment, create jobs, transfer technology, and develop unutilised land. Each claim deserves scrutiny. The 'unutilised land' argument is perhaps the most dishonest: the land acquired in most of these deals is not empty. It is used by smallholder farmers, pastoralists, and forest communities — people with customary land rights not recognised in formal legal systems, whose rights are therefore easily extinguished by a government signature on a contract they were never consulted about.

Land Grabbing in Africa: Key Facts
Scale: over 40 million hectares of African land acquired by foreign entities since 2008 — documented deals only.
Major acquiring countries: Saudi Arabia, UAE, China, South Korea, India, and various European entities.

Land Grabbing in Africa: Key Facts
Major target countries: Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Sudan, Zambia, Madagascar, South Sudan.
Purpose: food production for export, biofuel production, speculative investment.
Trigger: the 2008-09 food crisis, which alarmed food-importing countries into securing land abroad to produce their own food.
Madagascar case: a 2008 deal leasing 1.3 million hectares to South Korean company Daewoo Logistics for 99 years contributed to the political crisis that overthrew President Ravalomanana.
Most large-scale agricultural investments export their production — food grown on African land feeds foreign populations, not the communities that lost the land.

Food Sovereignty: Africa's Right to Feed Itself

The concept of food sovereignty — the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture systems, rather than having them defined by international market forces — is directly relevant to land grabbing. Africa, which contains sixty percent of the world's uncultivated arable land and the majority of the world's fresh water resources, has the physical capacity to feed not only its own population but a significant portion of the world. The fact that 240 million Africans are food insecure is not a result of physical scarcity. It is a result of the political and economic structures that have channelled African agricultural land and water toward foreign food security and foreign profit rather than African food security.

The solution is not the exclusion of foreign investment from African agriculture. It is the construction of legal frameworks that ensure African communities retain their land rights, that investment agreements require genuine local participation and benefit sharing, and that African governments prioritise food security over short-term investment revenues. Several African countries — most notably Ethiopia and Tanzania in recent years — have begun to develop such frameworks. The African Union's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) provides a continental framework for agricultural development that prioritises African food security, though implementation remains uneven.

Key Takeaways

Since 2008, foreign governments and corporations have acquired over forty million hectares of African agricultural land, often displacing smallholder farmers whose customary land rights lack formal legal protection, and exporting the food produced rather than feeding the communities that lost the land. Food sovereignty — African control over African food systems — is both a physically achievable goal, given the continent's resources, and a matter of unfinished political will. The next lesson turns to the institution Africa has built specifically to build the collective power this chapter argues is necessary: the African Union.