

The Political Economy of Commercial Agricultural Land in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical examination of the political economy of commercial agricultural land in Ethiopia, taking a case from the peripheral State of Gambella where the Anyuua and the Nuer ethnic groups interact. Since 2002, the government of Ethiopia has pursued a controversial investment approach that promotes large-scale investment dominated by FDI while officially denouncing the current wave of the neoliberal economic discourse. Such investment ventures in the State of Gambella have put significant agricultural lands under a long-term lease to foreign developers. The central argument of this study lies in the point that, in a political economy avenue where practices contradict official state ideology, mechanized agricultural developments face failure beyond adverse social and ecological crises. Under the guise of the political economy of development where the state takes in hand the responsibility for playing a leadership role, private developers cannot easily find a space for leverage for making productive investments. Rather, such ventures as the case of Gambella tend to institute land alienation of the rural indigenous poor who are already marginalized because of their double-peripheral positions – a manifestation of South in the South. The consequence of both inter-group relations and the environment is catastrophic. The paper concludes that the influence of (trans)national companies on indigenous communities living especially in fragile environments continues to be disconcerting whereas the conflation of the neoliberal inspiration in the peripheral regions appears to be disguising while leaving the local environment and inter-group relations at stake. Thus, the Ethiopian government should recognize the contradiction between its official ideology and the investment practices in agricultural lands overtaken by (trans)national developers.

Keywords: *Agricultural Investment, Land Politics, Political Economy, Resource Conflict, Ethiopia*

Introduction

With the advent of capitalism – ‘a system of production and reproduction based on a fundamental social relation between capital and labor’ (Bernstein, 2010, p. 1), which largely promotes individual wellbeing, ‘class analysis generally and peasant wars more specifically, ceased to be fashionable topics in academic circles’ (Buijtenhuijs as cited in Cramer, 2011, p. 278). Ignoring the agrarian roots of violent conflict (even in the urban areas), ‘social scientists have tended to see the underlying motivation for wars in developing countries ‘in terms of ethnic chauvinism or individual pecuniary gain’ (Cramer, 2011, p. 278). It is, therefore, important to note ‘the classic agrarian question of how agriculture is influenced by the capitalist economy

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which has been reformulated multiple times’ in an attempt to deal with issues of rural dwellers (Peluso & Lund, 2011, p. 668).

The rural agricultural land in the countries in the so-called global South, which have been owned by different indigenous communities in the past, is believed to host ‘nearly half of the world’s population’ – a great number of class of poor people (Borras, 2016, p. 3). This clearly shows the significance of ‘political economy[’s] perspectives in agrarian studies that stress the importance of understanding dynamics of agrarian transformation brought about by capitalism’s penetration of the countryside’ (*Ibid.*, p. 8).

This study provides a contestation of the New Institutional Economics and Agrarian Political Economy in the context of the Anyuua indigenous community who is living amidst large-scale land deals and sporadic conflict in Gambella National Regional State of Ethiopia. By utilizing secondary sources and qualitative approach of data analysis, the paper aims at vindicating the effect of Ethiopia’s pro-capitalist investment policy despite its developmental orientation, which commodifies land (Bernstein, 2010, p. 23). The paper argues that Ethiopia’s investment policy not only fuelled the continued violence between these two ethnic groups but also led the Anyuua to lose its lives and livelihoods. The pro-capitalist investment policy not only failed to achieve its objectives, but also resulted in violations of human rights, and serious socio-economic and environmental crises that transcend the rural poor. We draw on (i) Cramer’s argument that ‘processes of agrarian structural change are themselves inherently conflictual and frequently violent’ (Cramer, 2011, p. 278) and (ii) one of Borras’s category of violent conflict between ‘poor people *versus* poor people’ (Borras, 2016, p. 10).

Land Politics

In the 21st century – when neoliberal ideology reaches its zenith – the nation-states are not only the actors on issues that affect their citizens within their boundaries but also the partners of supranational organizations because of the shift from government to governance (German, 2014). In such a syndrome of partnership, the livelihoods of rural dwellers are being threatened by large-scale mechanized farms in most countries in the Global South – Africa, Latin America, and Asia. This shift ‘from government to governance’ has brought the involvement of supranational organizations like the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO) and non-state actors into the decision-making arena on issues

pertinent to citizens. Such a convergence of actors has weakened the nation-state by sharing their power at three levels referred to as a ‘triple squeeze’ (Borras & Franco, 2009, p. 9), namely, ‘from above’ through globalization where some regulatory powers have been increasingly ceded to international institutions such as WTO, IMF, and WB; ‘from below’ through the partial decentralization of political, fiscal, and administrative powers to local counterparts; and ‘from the sides’ through the privatization of some functions. As the authors maintain, rural dwellers, which account for three-fourths of the world’s poor predominantly living in these countries, are greatly affected by ‘the highly uneven and varied outcomes of globalization, decentralization and privatization policies’ (*Ibid.*). Such an outcome, we presume, is threatening the very existence of indigenous communities in fragile states found in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The involvement of supranational organizations, (trans)national companies, and non-state local actors, thus, adversely influences communities in fragile rural environments like the Gambella region of Ethiopia. In particular, these communities are being threatened by mechanized farms that need large-scale land acquisition, thereby, demeaning the indigenous communities’ way of farming and living under the guise of the contemporary neoliberal world order.

This has been brought about by the neoliberal idea of allegedly ‘most economically efficient use and allocation of land resources’ (Borras & Franco, 2009, p. 16), which has been uncritically integrated into the policies of the countries in the Global South. The integration was done by putting aside measures to help peasants to be efficient in their way while introducing the modern means of agriculture to their farmers since the time of the Structural Adjustment Program in the 1980s. Cognizant of their claim for efficiency, they design strategies that enable them to easily control resources in countries in the Global South. Among others, ‘making land markets more transparent and fluid’; ‘focusing on productive projects’; ‘decentralizing implementation’; and, ‘maximizing private sector involvement’ are strategies that Deininger (1999, p. 29-31) mentions guiding the capitalist way of land reform that facilitates and makes ways easy for the few rich to meet their objective of land control. Such kind of land control – ‘practices that fix or consolidate forms of access, claiming, and exclusion for some time’ and uses of strategies such as ‘[e]nclosure, territorialization, and legalization processes, as well as force and violence (or the threat of them)’ – adversely affect the lives, livelihoods and land ownership rights of the rural poor (Peluso & Lund, 2011, p. 668).

The involvement of the supranational organizations in the issues of the countries in the Global South, according to Borras and Franco (2009, p. 16), results in ‘a much greater degree of influence . . . in (re)shaping the nature, content, pace, direction, and perspective of national land policies’ of the countries in South. As Borras (2016, p. 3) argues, ‘conventional land reform disappeared from official policy agendas’ and was replaced by the neoliberal market-oriented land reform policy that commodified land and encouraged the capitalists to seize the land (including other natural resources) of rural dwellers. The countries in the Global South are hugely dependent on the supranational organizations, which ‘control large funding’ for their projects and other borrowings since most of them plan to get even part of their annual budget from the supranational organizations (Borras & Franco, 2009, p. 16). As a result, the organizations can easily influence these states and they are forced to compromise their power and promulgate policies that conform to the neoliberal pillars of these institutions. This leads to ‘land property rights formalization projects, land registration and titling, land administration, and market-led land reforms’ (*Ibid.*). This further leads the countries in the Global South to enter into ‘a new type of *negotiated* land reform that relies on voluntary land transfers based on negotiation between buyers and sellers’ (Deininger, 1999, p.3).

This policy, which questions the resource ownership of the rural poor implicated in neoliberals’ argument of efficiency and transfer of ownership rights of the rural poor to the rich, is not only incapable to fit the context of countries in the Global South, whose citizens live amidst the convergence of crises, but it is also a blow to the rural residents and indigenous communities across the countries in Southern region. The pro-capitalist land policies that the supranational organizations often promote ‘have had far-reaching impacts, mostly adverse, on the lives and livelihoods of poor peasants, small farmers, and rural laborers’ (Borras & Franco, 2009, p. 9).

Ignoring the suffering of the rural dwellers resulting from such policies, the neoliberals cheered their mode of production in large-scale agriculture as if it is resulting in ‘agricultural modernization, mechanized farming, employment creation, and positive spill-overs across the economy’ (Baglioni & Gibbon, 2013, p. 1559). But the reality on the ground is completely opposite. They are not ready or they do not want to see what the locals in the countries in the Global South are experiencing after they lost their land. They even go far to say that ‘land grabbing is an unacceptable term’, considering what they are practicing is a ‘legitimate business

transaction’ (Borras & Franco, 2013, p. 1723). The (trans)national corporations, which often control land in the Global South, and governments (including the local governments that are closer to witness the struggle and suffering of peasants in the rural areas) are silent on the ‘widespread land alienation, evictions and destruction of livelihoods’ of the locals (Baglioni & Gibbon, 2013, p. 1559). The same policies haunt the lives and livelihoods of peasants in Ethiopia through the rhetoric of development through large-scale mechanized agriculture.

Large-scale Land Acquisition in Ethiopia – A Glimpse

Influenced by the current wave of neoliberal economic discourse and guided by the rhetoric of development driven by supranational organizations, (trans)national companies, and non-state local actors, the Ethiopian government put in place an investment policy in 2002 intending to promote large-scale investment in the country (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2002). Accordingly, it facilitated ways for the penetration of mechanized farms deeper into the farmlands of indigenous communities in the peripheral regions of the country such as Gambella where the Anyuua and the Nuer ethnic groups emerge as good cases in point.

This puts the government in a situation where it is unable to fulfill ‘traditional obligations to the rural poor’ (Borras & Franco, 2009, p. 9). Alienating the government from its traditional duties, it drives it to a role that ‘is restricted to establishing the necessary framework and making available a land purchase grant to eligible beneficiaries’ (Deininger, 1999, p. 3). It minimizes the role of the government to simply facilitate access to land for the capitalists by making it a subservient that only serves the rich. In so doing, it leaves ‘many poor peasants and small farmers exposed to the harshness of market forces dominated by global corporate giants’ (Borras & Franco, 2009, p. 9). This is a direct anti-thesis, for instance, to article 89 sub-article 5 of the constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) which affirms that ‘government has the duty to hold, on behalf of the people, land and other natural resources and to deploy them for their common benefit and development’ (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995).

Beginning with Saudi Arabia and South Korea, which owned a large portion of land in Ethiopia and Madagascar in 2007/8 (Transnational Institute, 2013, p. 3), a large-scale land transfer is currently becoming the problem of the people of Global South. Ethiopia is one of the African states that promote export-oriented large-scale mechanized agriculture. Gambella, which is a conflict-prone region (Feyissa, 2003; Gebeyehu, 2013), is one of the places where (trans)national

corporations own huge tracts of land for a large-scale mechanized agricultural farm (Rahmato, 2011). The (trans)national corporations primarily need the land of these rural dwellers the fallout of which is the forcible eviction of the members of the Anyuua ethnic group from their land. This situation exactly fits Borras's (2016) dictum that 'in settings where the land is needed but the people are not, it is likely that villagers would be expelled from their land' (p. 9).

The penetration of mechanized agriculture in the Gambella National Regional State of Ethiopia, besides the marginalization and alienation of the rural poor from their land, and therefore, from their economic base, disrupts the natural and the social environments beyond endangering the livelihood systems. As a result, it ultimately proves the unsustainable nature of large-scale mechanized farms located amidst indigenous communities. By intensifying deforestation, increasing land degradation, and causing soil pollution because of the use of chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides, amongst others, these large-scale investments prove to be environmentally unfriendly. Similarly, by displacing the rural poor, these projects disrupt their social fabrics. In short, mechanized farms amidst indigenous rural poor prove to be unsustainable.

The Anyuua

Being one of the five indigenous ethnic groups besides Nuer, Majangir, Opo, and Komo, the Anyuua community is an ethnic group residing in the fertile lowland region of Gambella – one of the nine national regional states of the Ethiopian federation – forms a huge number of the predominant landholder and agrarian society (Central Statics Agency, 2007; Rahmato, 2011; Yonas & Ezra, 2014). Their livelihood is dependent mainly on their shifting cultivation of land (Feyisa, 2003) – one of the activities over which the 'mainstream conservation organizations and central-states had launched campaign to delegitimize and illegalize' (Borras, 2016, p. 7). The community is also dependent on the big trees in the forest that they inherited from their ancestors. They use the forest for food, medicine, firewood, shelter building, bee-hiving, *etc.* Moreover, they engage in fishing on the Baro River – one of the four main rivers in the region – as they are living adjacent to this river. In the recent past – before a decade or so, the community had to deal with the conflict with the Nuer (Feyisa, 2003). Nuer – a predominantly pastoralist ethnic group (Feyisa, 2003; Gebeyehu, 2013) – depicted as having an expansionist tendency

towards the land of the Anyuua. An Anyuua pastor named Akwey quoted in Feyisa (2003, p.37) states:

Our main problem with the Nuer is because they take our land. All people have their homes. The Anyuua, Opo and Majangir, they all live in their area. But with the Nuer it is different. Everywhere they go is their home. Nobody would prevent them to use the grass [pasture], as long as their cattle would not destroy our fields. We were in Nasser, Akobo, etc.; the Nuer took it. Now they are pushing us out of Gambella. In the near future, there would be no Anyuua left.

They have to deal only with the conflict with this group until the arrival of the (trans)national companies for large-scale agricultural investments. (Trans)national companies without any bureaucratic delays acquire a huge portion of land for a long period of contract with a very small amount of payment through the central state's investment policy that has never been observed elsewhere in the world (Rahmato, 2011). For instance, around 535,000 hectares of land have been given to (trans)national corporations for a price between \$1.5 to less than \$2 per hectare per year only in the Gambella region (*Ibid.*). The investment policy encourages large-scale mechanized agriculture with the objective to bring progress and development that goes beyond the region through improving 'the living standards of the peoples of Ethiopia through the realization of sustainable economic and social development' (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2002).

To make ways for the (trans)national companies to easily acquire land, the government forcibly relocates indigenous communities not only without adequate compensation but also without taking into account their fate. They are left empty-handed with no hope for survival. They are powerless and fearful to resist the forcible eviction through the government's rhetoric of 'villagization' and resettlement with the promise to ensure public services and a better life. After they are forcibly evicted, the (trans)national companies clear the old trees in the forest, which these people inherited from their ancestors and served as the means of their survival. Studies show that around 28,000 members of the Anyuua were forcibly removed from their land and resettled in ways that neglect their traditional ways of life and livelihood systems. This forced eviction has been accompanied by gross human rights abuses, including rape, killing, torture, and arbitrary detention of local population (Aljazeera, 2014).

Other members of this ethnic group who feared persecution and assassination have migrated to neighboring countries such as Kenya while the remaining residents find themselves battling to survive amidst these large-scale land deals and the sporadic conflict they are in with the Nuer. However, a closer look at Article 40 sub-article 4 of the FDRE constitution suggests that Ethiopian rural dwellers ‘have right to obtain land without payment and the protection against eviction from their possession’. Moreover, Article 40 sub-article 5 of the constitution guarantees that ‘the right to free land for grazing and cultivation as well as the right not to be displaced from their own lands’ (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995). There is, therefore, a gap between the rights of peasants enshrined in the supreme law of the land and the recognition and/or implementation on the ground.

The Conflict between the Anyuaa and the Nuer

Though the current conflict between the Anyuaa and Nuer is not started because of the global resource rush, this global rush for resource grabbing fuelled the already existing conflict between the two ethnic groups making it more violent and frequent. It is consistent with what Peluso and Lund (2011) observe as ‘land control, alienation, and dispossession have played classic and contemporary roles in primitive and ongoing forms of accumulation, with new frontiers, various kinds of territories, and ethnic and racialized conflicts emerging at virtually all levels’ (p. 668). The conflict between these two rural communities suggests the significance of bringing the issue of these rural dwellers into the scrutiny of violent conflict. As Cramer (2011) argues, this further implies:

investigating access to land and capital and means of mobilizing labor; it means investigating changes in the institutional regulation of such access and control; and it means identifying the tensions, techniques of compulsion and modes of resistance developed around productive relations in, typically, a globalized context (p. 277).

He further noted that:

Global food and energy price trends, the volatile play of commodity futures speculation upon prices of export crops and consumer foods, climate change, concerns over foreign investment and so-called ‘land grabbing’ are all capable of provoking struggles: over access to land (Cramer, 2011, p. 292).

Exploring the conflict between the Anyuaa and Nuer in the context of ‘the agrarian roots and dynamics of violent conflicts’ is relevant for understanding the roots of violence ‘shaped by, agrarian structures, relations and change’ (Cramer, 2011, p. 278). Cognizant of this fact, the

conflict between these communities is not limited only to the rural areas where they are living. It is widespread into the towns, particularly in Gmabella – the capital of the regional state – and creating a struggle for power (Mamo, 2017).

Noting Cramer's (2011) dictum that 'the bulk of analysis and commentary on violent conflicts in developing countries over the past 20 years or so has neglected the dynamics and tensions of agrarian political economy' (p. 277), we have opted to put the conflict between these two ethnic groups in the context of what Borras (2016) referred to as the conflict between 'poor people vs. poor people' – one of his four typologies of 'land-related political conflicts'. This includes the conflict between 'poor people vs. state', 'poor people vs. corporations', and 'poor people vs. big conservationists' (p. 9-10). Despite a clear disagreement of the rural people over the measure of the government to take their land and the forcible eviction they are facing, which may thus fall into the category of poor people and the state, the rural dwellers are not reacting violently. They are not, therefore, resistant to the alienation and marginalization to which they are subjected. Hence, it is important to focus on the category of conflict of poor people against poor people since these two poor rural communities have been in violent conflicts over land and related resources (such as pasture and water – important for the Nuer who are pastoralists dominantly) for a long period.

The government is also criticized for pushing the Nuer – a pastoral ethnic group that does not have much land to cultivate – to lead a sedentary agrarian life. This is to ensure that the (trans)national companies get enough land. As the government pushes the Nuer to a sedentary agricultural life, the Nuer pushes the Anyuua away from their lands (Mamo, 2017). This results in a continued violent conflict between these two indigenous communities over land. This conflict leaves the Anyuua in a vulnerable situation as they are losing their land to the (trans)national corporations on the one hand, and the Nuer on the other. Both the corporations and the Nuer have the support of the government for the same ends – that is, securing land for investors at the expense of the Anyuua who are thus marginalized and excluded.

The Problematic of Marginal Land

The Ethiopian government claims that the land which is given to (trans)national corporations is unused or marginal in the periphery areas such as in Gambella. However, there are studies that show the forcible eviction of the indigenous communities in the region and the taking away of

land from the agrarian community and providing it to the (trans)national companies (Moreda and Spoor, 2015; Rahmato, 2011; The Oakland Institute, 2011). Yonas and Ezra (2014, p. 167) argue that ‘the availability of unused agricultural land for investment is taken for granted’. The global food, energy and climate change crises coupled with the growing world population invokes the neoliberals’ argument for efficiency. This led them not only to control the marginal land but also the land that the indigenous people have been owning for the obvious reason that the marginal land cannot meet their market demand. As Borras (2016, p. 167) puts it,

key element of the current mainstream narratives about the food, energy, and climate change crises claims that there are too many of these problems, and the solution lies in the existence of marginal, under-utilized, empty, and available lands. The idea is to put these types of land to efficient productive use.

Moreover, the government’s claim of marginal land does not take into account, among others, the future of traditional agriculture that the indigenous community has been practicing for so many years, the environmental crises that it results in, and the fate of the youth of the countryside or future generation. This further facilitated the diminishing of land reserves and migration of the rural youth to the nearby towns in search of their livelihoods. Land reserves, as Borras (2016, p. 11) succinctly writes, ‘for future land demands including possible future farmers were rarely part of the deal. As a result, many rural youths have no possibility to gain access to their land, and leave the countryside’.

Conclusion

To conclude, the influence of the neoliberals through supranational organizations, (trans)national companies, and other non-state local actors, is becoming rampant particularly on indigenous communities living in fragile environments of the Global South. It is now becoming common to hear and to see the sufferings of innocent rural dwellers in the countryside because of the arrivals of these neoliberal ministries in their villages. Though the Anyuua is one specific community that is exposed to the harshness of neoliberalism, many other communities in Ethiopia are also suffering in the same way due to the same process of capitalist penetration into the villages of the countries in the Global South. It is, thus, a high time for governments in the Global South to get committed to help the rural dwellers to be, *inter alia*, efficient in their way rather than siding for the neoliberal rich whose engagements have caused destruction, not only to the livelihood systems of the rural poor but also to the natural environment. The Ethiopian government, in particular, should realize the contradictions between the theory and the practices of large-scale

agricultural investments in the context of indigenous communities. If the government is willing not only to protect but also to benefit these communities, it should first understand at heart the huge gap that is found between its decisions on the white papers and the much grey conditions of what is happening on the ground. It should, thus, make sure that not only the property rights of these people are duly guaranteed, but also their lives and livelihoods are accordingly secured if the state is to live up to its *raison d'être*, which is ever-expanding to secure economic provisions beyond maintaining peace and order. At the same time, and to the extent possible, this securitization should be given equally to the rich capitalists living in the urban areas and the rural poor.

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