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Marginal land and the global land rush: A spatial exploration of contested lands and state-directed development in contemporary Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The 'global land rush' or 'global land grabbing' phenomena has prompted concerns over the potential of large-scale land acquisitions to displace rural populations and impact food security in lesser-developed countries. State actors often assert that lands being leased to investors are 'marginal', 'wasteland', 'barren', or 'unused' without explicitly stating the criteria that are used to classify those spaces. Using Ethiopia as a case study, this paper synthesizes semi-structured interviews and geospatial land-use data to unpack the federal government's notion of 'marginal land' to investigate how land qualifies for deposition into a federal land bank set aside for future investment and the agro-ecological characteristics and human-environment interactions endemic to these areas. We find that government officials conceive land bank areas to be generally fertile but currently 'unused'. In reality, we find land bank areas: (1) are used by pastoralists or rural people practicing land extensive forms of cultivation that are only loosely integrated into the Ethiopian state, (2) overlap with protected areas such as National Parks, and (3) are located in places that have surface water resources the government intends to use for large-scale development such as irrigation or hydropower projects. We argue that the intended land uses of banked lands serve not only to fulfill larger development objectives but also increase state-accessible product produced in these areas strengthening the link between 'othering' labels, development, and state-making in the context of the global land rush.

1. Introduction

'Global land rush' or 'global land grab' are terms used to describe the rapid change in land use rights and land use patterns that result from the buying or leasing of large pieces of land in developing countries by or on behalf of state-affiliated or private investors (Borras et al., 2011a; von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009; Cotula et al., 2009). Domestic and foreign direct investment (FDI) to agriculture in developing countries is not new. However, the size and speed of land concessions for food and biofuel projects has marked the onset of a new phase that many believe warrants being distinguished within the longer-term historical processes of economic and social transformation in rural societies (Anseeuw et al., 2012).

Much of the early discussion on the 'land rush' has centered on exploring global drivers of the phenomenon as well as the localized impacts of land acquisitions on the livelihoods and environments of rural and marginalized populations. More recent research has begun to probe the activities of the states hosting land deals acknowledging the fact that state actors not only play a fundamental role in facilitating land acquisitions, but often consider them an integral feature of national development policy. For example, many developing states are not only establishing regulatory frameworks conducive to investment and providing investors with technical and financial support, but are also using a variety of methods to identify and enclose what is often customary land deemed suitable for investing (German et al., 2013).

States allocating or leasing rural land to investors often colloquially characterize these areas using labels such as 'marginal', 'unused', 'wasteland' or 'barren', among others. For example, the Philippine government is setting aside vast tracts of 'marginal' land for corporations for agribusiness projects (Borras et al., 2011c). In Cambodia, the government is targeting what is claimed to be 'non use' land for economic land concessions intended for agro-industrial plantations on what constitutes 53% of the

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country's arable land (Neef et al., 2013). Since these terms are state-defined and land labeling and classification is inherently a political exercise (Borras et al., 2011c; Comber et al., 2005; Robbins, 2001), critically examining how these labels are applied in the context of land leasing can provide useful information regarding state priorities as well as the role the transformation of these areas will play in achieving state-defined goals.

However, since many countries do not make land bank or land lease locations widely available to the public (if at all), our understanding of the ontological basis of these 'othering' labels as they are applied to investment land is limited by a lack of spatially explicit analyses at the national level. A lack of spatial data also means that links between banked investment land and the priorities and reach of the state are based on aspatial inventories of hectares to be developed or inferred from a subset of national, yet incomplete, geo-located cases. Spatially explicit national-level analyses are important for understanding the universality of case study findings as well as identifying broader counter-narratives regarding current land use and projections related to how land use might change once investment takes place in these areas.

This paper combines spatially-explicit data delineating land set aside for future land investment, semi-structured interviews of government officials, and biophysical, socio-cultural, and land use data to unpack the ontology of the state's 'marginal' land categorization and to juxtapose the state's promoted understanding of these areas with other land use narratives. We focus on Ethiopia where the federal government, represented by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has set aside millions of 'marginal' hectares of land in a federally delineated land bank. As Keeley et al. (2014) point out, Ethiopia is an important case when discussing large-scale land investment and leasing precisely because it both reinforces and challenges claims associated with the 'land grab' phenomenon. Similar to other lesser-developed countries, land leasing in Ethiopia has been contentious due to the impacts on rights and livelihoods at the local level. However, the government plays a central role in the process of procuring and developing land due to the fact that land deals for commercial agriculture are a crucial feature of the state's explicit agricultural strategy and foreign actors are not necessarily the main actors driving the transfer of land (Keeley et al., 2014; Lavers, 2012a). Our study thus offers insights relevant to Ethiopia as well as the broader literature on the global land rush.

Our spatial analysis validates the general findings of case studies by authors claiming that land leased to investors were previously (or currently, in the case of investment land yet to be developed) being used to support rural livelihoods (Shegro, 2013; Lavers, 2012b; Oakland Institute, 2011; Maru, 2011; Rahmato, 2011) as well as national parks. Combining our spatially explicit data with interview results also reveals inconsistencies among government actors as to which lands are targeted for future investment as well as the fact that there is no clear, systematic methodology by which the government identifies 'marginal' investment lands. Generally, these 'marginal' investment lands are not yet used for intensive, permanent agriculture and are located in areas with surface water that feature prominently in government plans for macro-economic development projects and cultivating state-accessible product. We argue that by creating and promoting the 'marginal land' class (and similar terms), government actors are engaged in a form of knowledge production that works to mask ambiguity in land use in targeted areas and promotes land valuation based solely on its perceived macro-economic development potential.

Our analysis thus deepens our understanding regarding the role and intended reach of the state and strengthens the link between 'othering' labels, development, and state-making in the context of investment land for the case of Ethiopia. In doing so, we demonstrate the value of not only using spatially explicit data to envisage potential land use changes, impacts on groups of people, and evolutions in political economy, but the value of combining spatially explicit data with interview data to understand the process by which attendant narratives regarding investment lands are conceptualized and applied by states in the context of the global land rush.

2. State narratives regarding land suitable for agricultural investment

Since Wolford et al.'s (2013) call for more research regarding the role of the state in land leasing, a growing body of research has begun to address the process through which these land acquisitions are reciprocally shaping, and being shaped by, the modern national state. As a result, increased attention has been directed toward state actors and the role they play in mediating, promoting, and governing aspects of land acquisitions recognizing that states are not necessarily passive targets coerced into selling off pieces of their national territory to more powerful economic or political players in the international landscape.

Some authors have answered this call by identifying state promoted narratives of legitimation around the topic of leasing land to investors for the purpose of agricultural development. One of the narratives researchers have identified among states in the Global South involves the state labeling of lands suitable for investor development (most often for biofuels) using terms such as 'marginal', 'wasteland', 'idle', 'unused', among others (Makki, 2014; Baka, 2014, 2013; Grajales, 2013; Neef et al., 2013; Lavers, 2012b; Nalepa and Bauer, 2012; Borras et al., 2011b, 2011c; Geisler and Makki, 2014; Rahmato, 2011; Daniel and Mittal, 2010; Cotula et al., 2009).

Inspired by seminal contributions in the field of political ecology and political science exploring land labeling as a policy maker's exercise in simplifying complex landscapes into fixed and legible categories (Robbins, 2001; Scott, 1998), the aforementioned authors treat these 'othering' labels as political constructions that can be powerful tools in manifesting new 'agricultural frontiers.' For example, Grajales (2013) illustrates this process in Colombia where the state classification of 'wastelands' provides the legal and political basis for violent territorial appropriation by paramilitary groups for oil palm expansion in geographically isolated borderlands.

Some researchers have approached these labels and rhetorical categorizations as environmental post scarcity narratives reminiscent of historical, colonial discourse rendering lands across Latin America, Asia and Africa as underused and unclaimed asocial voids yet still brimming with resource abundance and opportunities for investment (Wiley, 2011; Bridge, 2001). In terms of how this 'empty yet full' narrative (Bridge, 2001) may serve the state, Makki and Geisler (2011) argue that this discursive framing may succeed in directing investor attention to development sites that have been either politically or economically intractable. Authors have also contended that these classifications may serve to ameliorate anticipated concerns over the conflict between local food production and other uses that support the livelihoods of the rural poor (Borras and Franco, 2010). Borras et al. (2011c), in their work investigating lands for biofuels in Mozambique, use the example of (now former) Mozambican leader Armando Guebuza saying that only 'underutilised' or 'empty' lands would be cultivated for biofuels and that the state would 'avoid using lands used for food production.' Researchers have also contended that these labels also serve as an expression of bias for certain types of land uses believed to be the most economically salient or uses that best fit the notion of rural 'development' (Baka, 2014, 2013; Neef et al.,