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The politics of large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia: state and corporate elites and subaltern villagers

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ABSTRACT This article explores the relationship between federal and regional state elites' land authority and corporate elites, and how this intersects with the politics of subaltern villagers in the context of ongoing land acquisitions in Ethiopia. In the borderland region of Benishangul-Gumuz, the central state is concerned with the control of territory and people and cannot, it is argued, effectively devolve authority to the regional state. Competition over control of land resources is very much an intra-elite dynamic. The complexities that occur, fuelled by the politics of decentralisation, are played out in terms of contradictions in the land deal making, but are also reflected in land disputes and loss of local livelihoods.

RÉSUMÉ Cet article examine les rapports entre les élites gouvernementales fédérale et régionales éthiopiennes dans le contrôle sur la terre et les relations qu'elles entretiennent avec la grande entreprise. Dans un contexte d'accaparement des terres, il s'intéresse également à l'entrecroisement de ce jeu de relations entre élites et de la politique de la petite paysannerie. Préoccupé par le contrôle du territoire et de la population dans la région périphérique de Benishangul-Gumuz, le gouvernement central prétend qu'il ne peut déléguer son pouvoir au gouvernement régional. La complexité qui découle de cette situation, alimentée par la politique de décentralisation, se reflète dans l'incohérence des transactions foncières, les conflits fonciers et la perte de moyens locaux de subsistance.

Keywords: large-scale land acquisition; intra-elite dynamics; livelihoods; Benishangul-Gumuz; Ethiopia

Introduction

This article sets out to examine the contemporary political–economic dynamics of the role of elites in large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia by exploring contests over land and authority, with a particular focus on the Benishangul-Gumuz region.[1] By elites, we mean the state and global, national and local corporate/economic and political elites. The contenders for authority over the control of land are the federal and regional state elites. In this regard, the role of the state is conceived not only as a public entity but also as its representatives at different hierarchies acting in their own private interests.

A "big-push" for the acquisition of arable land has been underway in many African and other developing countries, particularly since the second half of the 2000s. Although land has always been central to the livelihoods of millions of smallholders, the issue has gained particular momentum today due to the heightened and fierce competition for this critical resource, involving a wide range of actors. This scramble for prime agricultural land is explained by a multitude of

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interconnected and mutually reinforcing factors and processes occurring at a global level. The major factors include high population growth, high food and fuel prices, high demand for biofuels and animal feeds, growing demand for minerals, the impacts of climate change, the expansion of trade regimes and the emergence of consumer- and corporate-driven food systems (IFAD 2008; Borras, McMichael, and Scoones 2010; McMichael 2010; HLPE 2011; De Schutter 2011; Borras and Franco 2012; Akram-Lodhi 2012).

In particular, the global food price crises that occurred in 2007–2008, and even as recently as 2010, have greatly affected the poor. The combined effect of the crises may have added tens of millions of people to the numbers of hungry people worldwide (Christiaensen, Demery, and Kuhl 2010; IFAD 2010) and further complicated food insecurity in many vulnerable countries, on the one hand, and in capital-rich countries that hitherto had depended on global food markets, on the other. This, in turn, has reinforced the global focus on the agricultural sector in general and the acquisition of large tracts of farmland in particular. As a result, several private and sovereign investors from a range of countries in the Gulf, Asia and Europe have been involved in large-scale land acquisitions in developing countries, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa but also in South-east Asia, the former Soviet countries and Latin America, to cultivate food crops and biofuels for the export market (FAO 2010; Cotula et al. 2011; Visser and Spoor 2011; Van der Ploeg, Franco, and Borras 2015; Wolford and Nehring 2015).

Although new opportunities could be created from increases in land investments for national growth, critical questions regarding the land rights of poor local communities still remain central and inadequately addressed. Empirical evidence is sparse with regard to actual and potential impacts of land-use change on the poor, who are at risk of losing access to and control over land. Many recent acquisitions have entailed the dispossession and displacement of rural households, damaging their local livelihoods, food security and access to key natural resources (Borras, Fig and Suarez 2011; HLPE 2011; Rahmato 2011; Moreda 2013). Due to inherent asymmetrical power relations, such large-scale land acquisitions involving powerful national and international corporate actors are more likely to put local livelihoods at risk (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009).

In the context of the recent wave of large-scale land acquisitions, many scholars have stressed the key role of the state. They want to understand how land acquisitions are shaping and being shaped by the state (Burnod, Gingembre, and Ratsialonana 2013; Peters 2013; Wolford et al. 2013; Goetz 2015). Here the state is not conceived as an actor with a unified voice and internal consistency in its agenda; rather, the state itself is a site of struggle over resources, power and authority among its various constituents (Watts 1989; Moore 1993). This implies the need "to unbundle the state, to see government and governance as processes, people and relationships" to gain a better insight with regard to the role of various state actors in land acquisitions (Wolford et al. 2013, 189). It has also been argued that investigation of the implication of land acquisitions for local land rights requires the analysis of not only the "bundle of rights" over land resources but also the "bundle of powers" – the range of formal and informal powers – embodied in and exercised by different actors (Ribot and Peluso 2003). It follows that access to land is not about rights only. Rather, it is more akin to power, implicating a wider range of social and political relationships that can constrain or enable various actors to benefit from resources for themselves or to facilitate the access of others by exercising "access control" (2003, 158).

In the case of Ethiopia, the recent and ongoing large-scale land acquisitions (measuring millions of hectares) of agricultural land by domestic and foreign corporate investors in lowland areas of Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromiya and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regions have raised widespread concerns (Rahmato 2011). These regions have become the main destinations for many investors in farmland. However, in the context of agrarian differentiation and unequal power relations, communities may not equally benefit or may even lose out from these farmland investments. This paper argues that, as opposed to other developing countries, in which global factors have been the major drivers of land deals, the promotion of large-scale agricultural investment in Ethiopia is planned on a grand scale central to the government's current development strategy. Given such an argument, the paper explores current trends and contradictions of the land acquisition process in the country in order to understand the role of elites, with a particular focus on the Benishangul-Gumuz region. It aims to shed light on how contests over land and authority are played out in federal and regional state contexts. The paper particularly focuses on the contradictions and contestations in the relationship between the federal and regional state level authority over land and natural resources. This is done through a case study of three selected *woredas* (districts)[2] of the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state.

Information for this study comes from a combination of various data collection methods carried out during intensive fieldwork (by the first author) from April to June 2012.[3] The methods include semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key informants, focus group discussions (FGDs), direct field observation and a secondary literature review. The in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 key Gumuz informants and 14 selected government officials and experts at various hierarchical levels. In-depth interviews with three informants from the Berta ethnic group were also conducted.[4] In addition, in the selected case study villages, a total of seven FGDs were conducted with the communities affected by the land acquisitions. Interviews were also conducted with five managers of investment projects operating in the study areas.

The next section provides an overview of the context of the study region. The following section briefly introduces agricultural commercialisation and large-scale land investment in Ethiopia. Subsequently, the article analyses the regional trend and contradictions of the land allocation process and examines the elite actors involved in the land acquisitions. In summing up, the conclusion considers the factors that might affect the government's continued support for large-scale land transfers as currently practised.

Background to the study region

The Benishangul-Gumuz region, on which this study focuses, is currently one of the nine administrative regions under Ethiopia's federal political system based on ethnic regional administration. This region, which is one of the areas perceived as *terra nullius*[5] and in which much of the current large-scale land acquisitions are focused, is located in the north-western part of the country, sharing an international border with Sudan and South Sudan in the west. Inside Ethiopia it shares borders with the Amhara and Oromiya regional states (Figure 1). It occupies an estimated area of 50,380 km^2 (BGRS 2004) and has a total population of 670,847 (CSA 2008). The population consists of the indigenous ethnic minority groups of Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo. It is also inhabited by settlers from other regions with diverse ethnic origins. The indigenous groups depend on a customary land tenure system of communal ownership and rely mainly on shifting cultivation for their livelihood. This is supplemented with other subsidiary activities such as hunting, gathering, fishing, livestock raising, traditional alluvial gold mining and honey production.

The region is generally perceived to have extensive untapped land resources, described as having a great potential for agricultural development: a reality which appears to have shaped the current state policy of leasing vast tracts of its land to investors. It is also endowed with many perennial rivers, such as the Dabus, Dedessa, Beles and Abay (Blue Nile), with a high potential for irrigated farming. It is estimated that about 1 million hectares of land in the region are potentially irrigable (MoFA 2010). Agro-ecologically, about 75 per cent of the

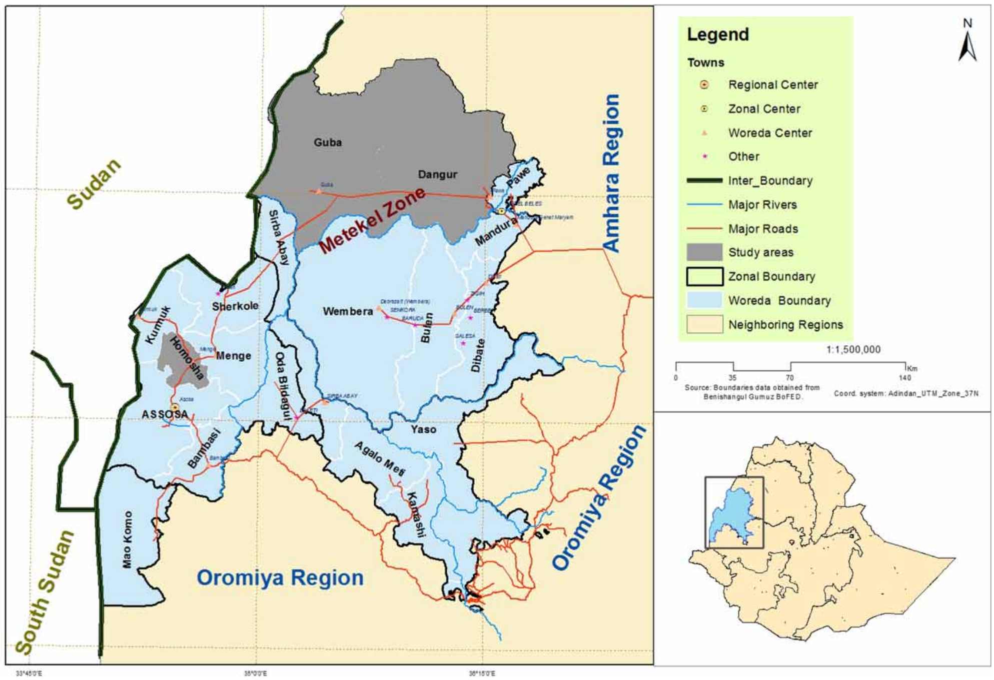

Figure 1. Map of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State, Ethiopia.
Source: This map created by Nigussie Abdissa, a colleague of the principal author who works in the Tana-Beles Integrated Water Resource Development Project, Assosa (Ethiopia), using ArcGIS 10.1 by Esri (© Esri). Sources: Boundaries data were obtained from the Benishangul-Gumuz Bureau of Finance and Economic Development (BoFED).

region's area is classified as lowland, while 24 per cent and the remaining 1 per cent constitute midland and highlands, respectively (MoFA 2010).

This region on the borderland, historically "a buffer zone and a trade entrepôt" between Ethiopia and Sudan (Markakis 2011, 84), was incorporated into the Ethiopian empire toward the end of the nineteenth century, during the reign of emperor Menelik II (Pankhurst 1977; Ahmad 1999). After this incorporation, its people were made to pay tribute in "slaves, ivory and gold" to the central state (Ahmad 1999, 433). In later periods, especially since the 1950s, the indigenous lowland communities have faced continual acts of encroachment and exploitation by neighbouring highlander communities, who were slowly expanding into the lowlands in search of cultivable land (Abbute 2002).

In general, population density in the country is high in the highland areas. The lowland regions remained sparsely inhabited by indigenous people and underdeveloped in terms of basic infrastructure. In addition to decades of gradual encroachments of highlander plough cultivators, the forced resettlement programme of the Derg regime in the 1980s moved tens of thousands of impoverished people from densely populated highland regions to the lowland areas, with predictably adverse consequences for the indigenous local communities (Markakis 2011). Furthermore, beginning in the early 1990s, the indigenous lowland communities have faced additional pressures on their land resources, caused by the introduction of private agricultural investment, which was commonly undertaken by investors who were ethnically from the highland regions. More recently, large swathes of land across the region have been offered to both foreign and domestic capital for production of food and agrofuels on an unprecedented scale. Much of the land offered for leasing is classified by the state and other elites as "unused" or "underutilised", presumably overlooking the spatially extensive use of land in shifting cultivation and agro-pastoralism, which poses apparent threats to the land rights and livelihoods of indigenous communities in these lowlands (Makki 2014). A backdrop to this *terra nullius* narrative is the central – and ongoing – role and extraordinary power of the Ethiopian state to determine the allocation and use of all land resources, making it particularly difficult for the weakly organised indigenous communities to negotiate effectively or secure adequate compensation from corporate investors or state actors.

Smallholder commercialisation and large-scale land investment

Since 2005, Ethiopia has emphasised the commercialisation of agriculture and expansion of the private sector participation to accelerate growth and poverty eradication.[6] Its consecutive five-year development plans (particularly PASDEP and GTP)[7] pursued a spatially differentiated strategy of promoting smallholder commercialisation but also large-scale commercial agriculture (MoFED 2010). On the one hand, focus has been placed on enhancing smallholders' role in intensified production of marketable agricultural products across much of the highlands, and on private sector investment in floriculture and horticulture, mainly in the surrounding highland areas close to major urban centres.[8] The objective here is to enable smallholder farmers to gradually shift from subsistence low-productivity agriculture to market-driven production of high-value products in order to increase their incomes. On the other hand, a strong push for extensive large-scale commercial agriculture undertaken by private investors is made in lowland peripheral areas in which abundant "unoccupied" or "unused" land is claimed to exist (MoFED 2010.).

Implicit in this strategy to maintain smallholders in the historically "core" highland areas is the aim to highlight their political significance for the current regime, which must continue supporting the smallholder sector for its existence (Makki 2012; Lavers 2012a). At the same time, policymakers are increasingly aware that Ethiopian agriculture at its present state cannot provide the considerable outlays of capital required for the industrial investments that the country needs to transform its national economy, and for that reason a strong push for large-scale mechanised agriculture in the lowlands is favoured. Added to these, the government seems to have gradually come to terms with the incontrovertible fact of persisting food insecurity and rural vulnerability, which demonstrated the lack of progress in two decades of agricultural strategy of distinct character (Markakis 2011; Lavers 2012a).[9] Thus, the recent surge in leasing large tracts of agricultural land, mainly in the lowlands, is a strategy to generate greater foreign exchange earnings. The government has been keen to promote and back private sector investment in land resources when the latter are interested in producing agricultural products primarily for export. In this regard, by the end of the GTP period (2015) the government aimed to generate a total of USD 6.58 billion from the agricultural export market. For this to materialise, over the same period an estimated 3.3 million hectares of land (in addition to land already allotted before the GTP) was to be transferred to large-scale agricultural investors (MoFED 2010, 48–49).

Recent figures from the government annual progress report on GTP implementation show that, during the 2012/2013 fiscal year, about 3.31 million hectares of large-scale investment land was identified and transferred to the federal land bank (MoFED 2014, 38). Nevertheless, over the last three GTP years, a total of 473,000 hectares of land was transferred to investors, of which only 11 per cent was reportedly developed by these investors (MoFED 2014, 38). It appears that the plan has not worked in the way it was designed, as the land actually transferred to investors (and the proportion of land developed) was far below the GTP plan to lease 3.3 million hectares by 2015. Among the major factors that have resulted in low performance, the government pointed to delay in the participation of investors and limited capacity to develop all the land transferred to them (MoFED 2013, 2014).

Recognition of the importance of land as a key strategic resource has led the government to set up a centralised institutional structure for controlling the administration of land that is earmarked for agricultural investment. For this purpose, the Ministry of Agriculture has been given overall responsibility, within which the Agricultural Investment Support Directorate (AISD) was established in 2009.[10] More specifically, AISD has been created to administer agricultural investment lands, and thus to transfer such lands to all foreign investors as well as to large domestic investors requesting lands measuring 5,000 hectares or more. To this end, agricultural investment lands identified by regional states were transferred into a centralised pool called the Federal Land Bank, to be administered by AISD.[11]

Evidence from various sources indicates that the state and profit-seeking local elites (such as domestic investors and members of the Ethiopian diaspora) have undertaken most of the land investments, though the involvement of foreign investors has been significant (Oakland Institute 2011; Rahmato 2011). However, trends reveal that foreign investors often lease large blocks of land when compared with domestic investors (both public and private). In addition, the state itself is directly engaged in the acquisition of big chunks of land, especially for state-run sugar plantations.

While foreign investors aim for profits, the strong political commitment and push from the government centres on the likely development impacts that would be achieved from large-scale investments in land resources (MoFED 2010; Rahmato 2011). However, widespread concerns have been raised over the possible adverse consequences of large-scale agricultural land acquisitions for the subaltern groups, particularly for poor, marginalised and vulnerable rural groups, putting into question such optimism (Rahmato 2011; Shete 2011; Fisseha 2011; Lavers 2012b; Moreda 2015). This, and the relationship between federal and regional state level authority and how this is played out in land deals, are the themes that are analysed in the next section.

Land investment in the Benishangul-Gumuz region: trends and contradictions

As already noted, the Benishangul-Gumuz region typifies major acquisitions of land for commercial investments. The extent of such transfers has increased, particularly since 2005. According to the data we compiled, the amount of land transferred in the region to investors, both domestic and foreign, approaches 340,590 hectares. The transfer has been undertaken both by the regional state and the federal government. Within the region, the responsibility for transferring land to investors was previously vested in the regional Investment Office. It now lies with the newly established Regional Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use (BoEPLAU). Until recently, the process was that prospective agricultural investors interested in the region applied directly to the Investment Office for a license. The Investment Bureau still grants licenses, but the authority for allocating land to investors is now vested in the BoEPLAU. Once they received an investment license, investors were then eligible to request land for agricultural investment through lease arrangements. Investors were required to submit written applications for investment lands to the Investment Office. Potential investors normally indicated in their applications the *woreda* in which they wished to invest, even sometimes further specifying the *kebele*. Then the investment office directly inquired with the *woreda* to identify land appropriate for the investment purpose. The *woreda* administrative council then appointed an ad-hoc committee to identify the required land and facilitate the transfer process. As local authorities were the ones responsible for land allocations, the committee also included *kebele* representatives to identify the required land and thus undertake the demarcation of the boundaries of the land through traditional methods. Finally, the minutes of the committee regarding its activities was sent to the regional Investment Office and was then eventually presented to the Regional Investment Board, chaired by the president of the regional state, for final decision.[12] In that way, investors acquire rural investment lands through arrangements ranging from short-term contracts to long-term leases after signing the contract with the president.[13] This process had left many fault lines that have arguably created ineffectiveness and adverse consequences, as we shall see in the course of the discussion.

Data obtained from the Regional BoEPLAU indicate that more than 280 projects have acquired rural land through the Investment Office in the period 2005–2010, covering over 126,159.6 hectares (Moreda 2013). Almost all of these investors were domestic economic and political elites and they were allotted land by the regional state, measuring from 100 to 8,000 hectares, the majority being less than 500 hectares (Moreda 2013, Annex 2). The evidence we collected reveals the involvement of an array of individuals and business enterprises, including civil servants, the diaspora and local political elites. This trend complicates the popular assertion that foreign corporate investors are the primary actors who are engaged in the acquisition of land in the country.

There is also a rising trend in which the federal government (through the Ministry of Agriculture) has been engaged in the transfer of land to both domestic and foreign investors. Evidence obtained from various sources revealed that as of January 2012, 17 investment projects have been granted land by the federal government, involving 214,431 hectares of land across the region, mainly in the Metekel Zone (Benishangul-Gumuz Region Investment Office 2012; MoA 2015 [collated by the authors]).

Generally, an estimated 1.4 million hectares of land have been earmarked for commercial agricultural investment in the region that will be administered by the federal government.[14] Currently, there is a strong criticism over the way in which the federal government has identified the land that is made "available" in the federal land bank that has been transferred to potential investors. Experts and officials at different capacities interviewed unanimously indicated that the federal government identified the "investment lands" based on the spatial analysis of satellite images and aerial photographs, without verifying the data through community level socio-economic field research. The informants stressed that critical aspects, such as local land use practices and patterns, were not taken into account in the land allocations and thus created many problems for local communities as well as for the environment (Interview with BoEPLAU senior official, Assosa, April 2012).

Despite increasing land acquisitions across the region, classifications of land uses have not actually been done. The practices observed hitherto were based on the notion that the region has abundant "unoccupied land". Such notions can lead to "very rough, sometimes misleading, representation of actual existing rights to land" (Scott 1998, 47). This study also shows that land allocations were not largely cognisant of the fact that indigenous people, particularly the Gumuz, are shifting cultivators, and communal lands that appear "unused" are indeed key sources of their livelihoods. Information gathered from local communities and selected informants from government offices indicates that genuine local consultations over classifications of land were not carried out and thus the trend of land allocation for investment in the region was simply based on the perspective of a few *kebele* leaders, *woreda* administrators, regional state officials and the federal government (the Ministry of Agriculture). A farmer in his early 40s in Qotta *kebele* within Dangur *woreda*, who said that he has been an active participant in community affairs, remembers the way in which he first came to learn of the acquisition of land in his village:

> No one in our village was consulted or informed about the investment land acquisitions, which have now surrounded our village. For your surprise, I, myself by coincidence met employees of one of the investors in the field while they were clearing the land for constructing their camp when they first came. I found the situation strange and I didn't take time asking them: Who are you? Why are you clearing our land? Who gave you the permission? Promptly they told me that they were given by

> the *woreda* administration with the consent of *kebele* leaders and for that, they said, they have legal documents. (Interview, May 2012)[15]

As the above account demonstrates, transparent and broad local community consultations have not been part of the process, although the role of local- and district-level authorities as facilitators of the land transfer is observed. According to informants (from zonal government offices), such drawbacks emanated from the lack of clear guidelines for the allocation of land to agricultural investments which take account of the regional context (Interview, April–June 2012). The promotion and administration of commercial agricultural investments in the region, mainly before 2010, were not consistently implemented according to land administration and use policies and regulations designed and based on the objective realities of the region. The regional government did not put forward sound criteria or preconditions for the selection of competent investors among applicants. Most of the local investors who have already acquired land in the region have neither the required capital nor the technology and relevant experience to engage in large-scale agricultural investments. The result, of course, is that the land is mostly kept idle or misused. In this regard, it would arguably appear that some investors acquired lands for speculative purposes, in contravention of the proclamation that land cannot be sold or exchanged by any other means of exchange.[16] Currently, for example, the land acquisitions have been used to benefit from financial institutions, particularly from the Development Bank of Ethiopia, since investors who have leased rural lands are able to present their use rights as collateral (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

An assessment by the regional government reports that of 65,540.3 hectares of land transferred in the Metekel Zone since 2005, 11,615.37 hectares are currently developed, which is less than 20 per cent.[17] In addition, the evidence also shows that four investors did not start operations after they acquired land within the Zone. What became evident through this study is that, in the same way as their peasant counterparts, some of the so called "investors" have been using animal traction for cultivation, arguably due to the lack of capital to purchase tractors and other farm machines. One informant (from government offices) put his sentiment regarding the situation as follows:

> Most of the time, when investors first come to apply for investment lands, they normally show up driving luxury cars as if they are rich and can afford to finance large commercial farms operated by modern farm inputs and technologies. But once they acquire land they either operate far below expectations or keep the land idle. Even some were shamefully found cultivating by oxen and donkeys. (Interview, Mankush town, June 2012)

Another senior expert interviewed in Assosa, the regional capital, confirmed the tendency of some investors to use animal traction for ploughing and pointed out that such practices have been widely evident in some *kebeles* of all the three administrative zones in the region. For example, the practice of some investors who have acquired land in Jaba *kebele* within Dangur *woreda*, as well as in some *kebeles* of Bambasi, Yaso, and Belojiganfoy *woredas*, could be mentioned as typical cases in this regard (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

More interestingly, there are also cases in which "investors"[18] who were allocated or acquired land in one way or another engaged in renting their land to third parties, although this is in fact strictly illegal. In the words of one key informant:

> We [the regional government] have now realised that some investors rent out the land, which they leased from the government, by making deals illegally with people whom they brought from other regions, mainly from the Amhara regional state. These investors distribute their leased land for many of those migrant workers who originally came to work as wage labourers in the commercial

> farms. These labourers normally work on the farm while living in temporary shelters constructed on part of the land. This way, the investors collect rents from these peasants/wage labourers who farm the land in fragmented ways usually using animal power. This is simply anti-development activity and a rent-seeking behaviour. (Interview, Assosa, 18 April 2012)

Most of the informants clearly pointed out, in particular, that this is because the system by which such "investors" acquired land did not take into account whether the applicants actually have investible capital and overall development capability (Interview, April–June 2012). The limited consideration of investor development competence can be interpreted in two ways. One is the intention of reducing restrictions in order to significantly attract potential investors, as the region is a remote area on the borderland with limited infrastructural facilities. The other is that this was intentionally overlooked to leave some grey area over which some rent-seeking government officials and their associates participated in the land acquisitions. There is, in fact, evidence that some government officials were involved in the land acquisitions. Informants in Guba *woreda* disclosed that at least seven former local officials, including former heads of *woreda* government offices, a former regional bureau head and a former member of the Ethiopian parliament, held investment lands ranging from 200 to 400 hectares in different *kebeles* within the *woreda* (Interview, June 2012). During the fieldwork, we were also able to witness, by sheer coincidence, one former high-ranking government official of the regional state applying for substantial agricultural investment land in Guba *woreda*.[19]

The current trend of land acquisitions in the region is further demonstrated in a recent assessment report that shows that some investors did not even have any legal contract or agreement with responsible government offices.[20] The report revealed that about 40 investors held land within the region without any contract made with the government; out of which 23 were found in Metekel Zone, eight in Assosa Zone and the remaining seven in Kemashi Zone. In relation to this case, one informant from the regional government office stated that with only an investment certificate, some investors have been using land after acquiring it through informal ways, often by dealing directly with local- and district-level political elites (Interview, Assosa, April 2012). By capitalising on existing ambiguities and overlaps in enforcement and implementation of land leasing regulations, as well as the lack of clarity about the roles of various state actors, many domestic economic and political elites have been able to use the opportunities created for their private benefit. As the regional government official explained, some investors – particularly those whose political connections give them the muscle to do so – were able to acquire land and start using it prior to establishing the required deal with relevant regional offices. Local authorities were simply told that the tedious administrative process was under way. Sometimes, evidently, the local authorities are swayed by the development opportunities that such investments are claimed to bring (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

In spite of these, a new land proclamation was adopted in 2010 to address existing wide concerns and anomalies with regard to the land sector across the region. As stated in article 20 (2q) of the regional state's Land Proclamation no. 85/2010, "rural land investment activities carried out without consideration of investor development capability and environmental concerns, prior the proclamation, shall make corrections step by step through study and appropriate law" (BGRS 2010). Accordingly, some measures have been taken following this proclamation. Information obtained from the Regional Investment Office indicates that a total of 32 agricultural investment projects have been cancelled for different reasons. Despite this, unsurprisingly some of these cancelled projects were still using the land. A key informant, who was one of the team that prepared the regional government's assessment report mentioned earlier, indicated that those previously cancelled eight projects in Guba *woreda* were found to be using the land, as observed during field visits in connection with the assessment (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

As already indicated, rising trends show that increasing levels of land transfers to investors have been directly carried out by the federal government, despite the constitutional proclamation that granted regions the authority to administer land and other natural resources. However, as Zewde (2008, 353) notes, "political power (alas!) has its own logic; it is not necessarily bound by promises and constitutional guarantees". It has been argued that the trend of administering land by the federal government is justified in relation to the prevailing limited capacity of the regional government to manage substantial land investments. The argument was that the lack of adequate institutional infrastructure among "emerging regions" to govern land deals involving large commercial investments could lead to corruption. Almost all informants from the regional government offices admitted the tendency to allow the federal government to act where institutional capacity in the region was weak. A key informant from the regional government office observes:

> Currently, the regional government does not have strong institutional capacity to promote and attract potential investors, especially foreign companies. Previously, land investment and administration processes involved many offices. But since 2010, the BoEPLAU has predominantly handled these responsibilities. As a newly established office, it has limited technical and administrative capacity to manage growing land investments. So we believe that the involvement of the federal government to attract investors will fill the observed gaps in the regional trend. So far, in addition to domestic investors, Indian and UK companies have come to our region through the federal government. In terms of their investment capacity and overall potential, these investors are much better when compared with those investors who have been granted land by the regional government. (Interview, Assosa, 18 April 2012)

Despite this, a lot of criticism has been raised regarding the involvement of the federal government in the administration of investment lands, with particular concerns over the implied processes and relations of power.

Information collected during our fieldwork reveals that neither local communities nor respective regional authorities were involved in the land deals committed so far by the federal government (Interview, April–May 2012). Due to this, it appears difficult for the regional government to challenge and negotiate land transfers that have been or will potentially affect local land rights or to promote investments based on distinct regional socio-economic and ecological contexts. Interestingly, during the fieldwork, detailed information on those investment projects that have already acquired land through the federal government was not available in any of the regional offices. What we found was a partial list that was sent by the Ministry of Agriculture. The respective regional authorities were not even clear about the identity of some of the investors and lacked information about the size or location of land allocated directly by the federal government. The critical point that emerges is that the regional government is either unable or unwilling to take any steps to ensure that benefits from agricultural investments actually accrue to the regional state and its people. For instance, this was manifested in the assessment report (mentioned earlier) of agricultural investment projects, undertaken by the regional government, in which those investment projects that were allotted land by the federal government were not part of the report. In this respect, informants from regional authorities mentioned that the assessment team excluded land deals administered by the federal government and instead focused only on projects that have acquired land through the regional government (Interview, April 2012). This demonstrates inherent asymmetries in political power that exist between the regional state and the federal government, the latter having undisputed sway. This apparently contradicts decentralised political power and decision making in rural land administration, although this is the desire clearly stipulated in the land administration proclamations both by federal and regional governments. As a result, local and regional authorities have now exerted little or no influence over substantial land deals administered by the federal government that could have considerable impact on local land uses and biodiversity. In addition, the existing trend shows the absence of any unified monitoring and evaluation system for the land investment projects. The result is simply competing power and some conflict over procedures and processes. As has been observed in many sub-Saharan African countries, “putting decentralisation into practice has been hindered by vested interests in retaining central control over decision authority or resource rents, limited capacity, and the widespread tendency to devolve responsibilities without corresponding resources and authority” (German, Schoneveld, and Mwangi 2013, 2–3).

While it has been accepted to some extent that the regional state does not have strong institutional and technical capacity to effectively coordinate and administer its land and other natural resources, resorting to administering land by centralised federal government bureaucracies complicates the process and creates adverse consequences. Such a trend preserves the hegemony of the central state over the regional state and its people, which is to some extent a repetition of the central state’s historical monopoly of state power during the previous regimes. It would have been sound and convincing had the federal government embarked on building and strengthening existing regional institutions through the provision of continuous capacity-building trainings and technologies to strengthen its organisational infrastructure. In this regard, an informant from the regional office indicated that, so far, only 10 days of short training on the application of GPS technology and data processing has been organised by AISD of the Ministry of Agriculture for land administration personnel recruited from *woreda*, zonal and regional offices (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

The hegemony of the federal government in decision-making power, as well as the regional trends exhibited so far in land allocation processes, is based, we argue, on the historically rooted prejudice that indigenous ethnic groups of the region are “backward” and their traditional practices are impediments to intensifying the utilisation of natural resources. In contrast with other countries, in which global drivers have paramount influence, agricultural investments in Ethiopia, particularly in its lowland regions, are planned on a grand scale central to the government’s current development strategy (MoFED 2010). Therefore, while the land acquisitions are contested and negotiated in practice at regional level, the overall policy is set at the federal level. This is also closely related to the fact that the state is the owner of all land and that various state actors have power in various degrees to designate and expropriate land for “the public interest” or for “development” purposes. As Ribot and Peluso (2003, 169) noted, “discourse and the ability to shape discursive terms deeply influence entire frameworks” around land investment and development.

As already noted, existing discourses overwhelmingly resulted in the misrepresentation and exclusion of local communities from participating in the identification, delineation and transfer of substantial land to investors, although this process could have an enormous impact on them. This is not an exception to the historical exploitation and marginalisation of indigenous people such as the Gumuz and other groups who inhabited lowland areas on the borderlands, which were once sources of ivory, gold and slaves (Ahmad 1999; Donham 2002). These historical relations have greatly influenced the socio-economic and political positions of ethnic groups of the region and are still visible when compared with other highland regions. The Benishangul-Gumuz region endured a long history of exploitation by the central state and has been marginal to state power (Pankhurst 1977; Abbute 2002; Markakis 2011). As noted by Zewdie (2008, 273), “for the Ethiopian highlanders, the lowlands long signified little more than a natural hunting ground for elephants and slaves, and a source of tribute more raided than collected”. Since 1991, although the region has been granted significant power of self-administration associated with the creation of an ethnic-based federal system, it appears that in practice the region has only nominal authority to administer its land resources, especially when it comes to much of its potentially cultivable land that can be brought under large-scale commercial agriculture (see also Markakis 2011, 260; Lavers 2012b, 814; Keeley et al. 2014).

In the Benishangul-Gumuz region and other "emerging regions" of the country, there is a particular political economy, and a tension – centred on ethnicity – with the central state, which is mostly seen as an oppressor and extractor of resources. Thus, external capital and the federal state are seen from the local perspective as one, with a common purpose. As we have argued, the central state has a key concern associated with the control of territory and people in "marginal" areas, and cannot devolve power to the regional state governments in practice.[21]

It is important to note that, given the prevailing politics of decentralisation, the federal government offices have neither the legitimacy nor the local knowledge and capacity to effectively administer land deals in remote areas on the borderlands and cannot provide appropriate contextualised responses to land-related local issues that arise. What has resulted from direct federal government involvement in the formal land deals is, indeed, conflict and overlap with regional state level authority. This competition over control of land resources creates fault lines that can be used by some local elites and interest groups to their own benefit. This also means that the legitimate authority to monitor the investment projects is equally at stake. This trend in fact poses threats to the territorial rights of indigenous local communities as well as to the environment.

Conclusions

Although diverse global factors such as volatility in food prices, increased demand for biofuels and feeds, the impact of climate change and the financialisation of commodity markets have been important drivers of recent large-scale land acquisitions across many developing countries, in Ethiopia this has been primarily driven by the state. At present, the government is pursuing a strategy of promoting large-scale, export-oriented agricultural investment as a major part of its overall development strategy that envisages making Ethiopia a food-secure and middle-income country by 2025. To this end, the leasing of land in the lowland regions to investors has been envisioned on a grand scale and, so far, large swathes of land have already been transferred to investors. The process has entailed the transfer of power over the administration of land resources (investment lands) from regional states to the federal government, enabling the central state to retain its hegemony and impose its far-reaching programmes on targeted peripheral regions.

This study has uncovered the scale of land acquisitions throughout the Benishangul-Gumuz region. Contradictions in the land acquisition process suggest a tendency for subaltern groups, particularly the poor, marginalised and vulnerable indigenous communities, to be displaced from their land and their livelihoods disrupted, causing land contestations. The ongoing land allocation process, largely predicated on the perception by the state and other elite groups of abundant "underutilised" or "unoccupied" land in the region, overlooks traditional land use practices and the social relations of local communities. Genuine community consultation and participation have not been part of the land acquisition process. Instead, hegemonic representations by the state have prevailed, expressed in the manipulation of existing institutional and administrative frameworks over the allocation of land for commercial investments, and in terms of "access control": the ability to determine who gets to use land for what purpose. Undoubtedly, there are gains for some local economic and political elites, as well as the state, from such acquisitions, but there will be little gain and possibly great loss for the region's local communities. What attention is paid by the authorities to the impact of land acquisition tends to be based on dewy-eyed optimism.

As this study reveals, the role of local and regional state authorities in relation to land allocation has been greatly undermined because of the direct intervention by central state elites. It appears that the increasing direct involvement of the federal government has been regarded by the regional authorities with mixed feelings. It is welcomed as a contribution to expand land investments, but also seen as a limitation of the regional state's authority over decisions regarding its land resources. The contestations that emerge over land resources and authority show the nature of political (and economic) power relations between the federal government and the regional states. In the strategic case of land development, it appears that the federal government could not devolve practical authority to regional states, despite the constitutional provision to do so. This potential contest among and within state actors (regional and federal) may adversely affect the land rights of local communities, who are least able to defend their rights against the current combined weight of the state and other elite actors. The ongoing large-scale land acquisition is thus very much the result of state policy and intra-elite dynamics.

Although the government has acknowledged that the plan has not worked out so far in the way it was envisaged, given its policies of promoting large-scale export-oriented agriculture, more land transfers are likely to occur in the future, as much land has already been earmarked for this purpose. However, an increase in such land transfers would certainly depend on the ability of investors to deliver on their promises to the government in the short term: actually developing the land leased, raising agricultural productivity and producing goods for export. If there is no clear evidence of benefits accruing to the state from the agricultural investment projects, then this may affect the state's continued support for such large-scale land transfers. In this regard, it seems that the government has already started rethinking such large-scale land leases, as some of the projects appear to have failed to materialise or have not lived up to expectations (Keeley et al. 2014).

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Notes

1. This article partly draws on Moreda (2013).
2. There are five tiers of government administration in the country, which are (from the highest to lowest administrative unit): federal, region, zone, *woreda* and *kebele*. *Woreda* is roughly equivalent to district, while *kebele*, especially in rural areas, corresponds to a group of villages.
3. For the intensive fieldwork, two *woredas* from Metekel zone, namely Dangur and Guba *woreda*, were selected. In addition, a short visit was made to Homosha *woreda* in Assosa zone. These areas are the main foci of recent large-scale land acquisitions in the region. Within these *woredas*, we selected some villages based on investment concentration as well as expert opinion, particularly regarding accessibility and representativeness. These are three *kebeles*, namely Gimtiya, Dachigeri and Qotta from Dangur *woreda*, and two *kebeles*, namely Ayicid and Mankush, from Guba *woreda*. In addition, the Berta

ethnic group-dominated Tsori-al-metema *kebele* in Homosha *woreda* was included. A brief field trip from Mankush town to Almehal town was made in order to capture through direct observation some important aspects that were not fully represented in the selected *kebeles*.

4. The Gumuz ethnic group largely inhabit Metekel and Kemashi administrative zones, while the Berta ethnic group inhabit the Assosa administrative zone of the region, both constituting the most numerous indigenous ethnic groups of the region (Figure 1).
5. For a detailed analysis of the *terra nullius* discourse, see Makki (2014).
6. Although due attention on both agricultural commercialisation and promotion of the private sector investment was given since the last poverty reduction document (PASDEP), various support and incentive mechanisms to attract foreign direct investment have been put in place since 2002/2003 (see FDRE 2002, 2003) and were amended in 2008 (FDRE 2008).
7. Under the overarching policy framework of Agricultural Development-Led Industrialisation (ADLI), the country pursued successive poverty reduction strategies: the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP), the Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP) and the current Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), which is being implemented from 2010/2011 to 2014/2015.
8. MoFED (2010) shows that the country has been able to register a success record of increasing export markets for flowers by private investors over the last five-year period. According to a recent government report, a revenue of USD 186.1 million was generated from the export of flowers in 2012/2013 (MoFED 2014, 22). However, this was USD 12.6 million in 2004/2005.
9. While government sources show that agriculture grew at an average annual rate of 8.4 per cent over the last five years (MoFED 2010, 4), roughly 7–8 million people have always been chronically food insecure. In 2012/2013, for example, the total number of beneficiaries from the country's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), a key progam designed for food insecure areas, was 6.89 million (MoFED 2014, 37).
10. As of 2013, the AISD was reorganised as the Agricultural Investment Land Administration Agency (AILAA) under the Council of Ministers Regulation No. 283/2013.
11. The Constitution of Ethiopia adopted in 1995 gives regional states the power to administer all land and other natural resources; the recent centralisation into AISD/AILAA is thus contrary to the constitution (Markakis 2011; Lavers 2012b).
12. The Regional Investment Board is composed of members from the regional state council, the investment office, Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use, Bureau of Agriculture, Bureau of Finance and Economic Development and the Revenue Office.
13. The lease period in the regional state ranges from 15 to 40 years.
14. Interview with BoEPLAU senior official, conducted by the first author in April 2012, in Assosa.
15. All interviews for this study were conducted in Amharic or Gumuz, with the help of a research assistant fluent in both languages. The English translations from Amharic were done by the lead author of this article. The translations from Gumuz were first rendered into Amharic by the research assistant and then into English by the author.
16. BGRS (2010). Note that the term "land speculation" is used here not in its full sense.
17. Note that the figures do not include land transfers in the region that are administered by the federal government.
18. The informant contended that they are called investors only for the reason that they have leased land, in a way to explicitly question their competence.
19. This happened while the first author was at Guba *woreda* Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Branch Office and Agriculture Office for consultations as part of the fieldwork.
20. This was a joint assessment report on agricultural investment projects by BoEPLAU and Investment Office, May 2012, Assosa.
21. See also Alden-Wily (2003, i). In the case of post-1991 Ethiopia, despite the establishment of a federal political system aimed at decentralising state power to regional constituents, the way in which the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – a coalition of ethnic-based parties – has been organized under a centralized party structure appears to undermine the objective of devolving power to regional state governments. The EPRDF controls all regional state governments either directly through its coalition member parties or indirectly through its affiliates. Regional state governments are not likely to operate independently of this party in power at federal level to pursue their regional interests or genuinely represent them at the federal level (Aalen 2002; Makki 2012).

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