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### A view from the top: examining elites in large-scale land deals

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## A view from the top: examining elites in large-scale land deals

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**ABSTRACT** A rise in large-scale land acquisitions has been documented in the popular media and scholarly literature, but with little attention to elite actors and their motivations. In this introduction to the special issue, we expand upon commonly held understandings of the drivers of global land acquisitions to explore the complex, dynamic and sometimes contradictory motivations of elites directly and indirectly involved in land deals. Focusing on the relationships between state actors, private investors, transnational corporations and scientific experts, we outline some principal ways in which elites with diverse interests shape land negotiations. We then introduce the articles in this issue and their contributions to the literature on land deals.

**RÉSUMÉ** La croissance des acquisitions foncières de grande échelle a fait l'objet de nombreux articles tant dans les journaux que dans les publications universitaires. Cependant, les élites qui y jouent un rôle et leurs motifs ont très peu retenu l'attention. Dans cette introduction au numéro spécial, nous élargissons les interprétations usuelles des dynamiques de l'acquisition de terres à l'échelle mondiale en explorant les motifs complexes, dynamiques et souvent contradictoires des élites directement et indirectement impliquées dans les transactions foncières. En mettant l'accent sur les relations entre les acteurs étatiques, les investisseurs privés, les sociétés multinationales et les scientifiques, nous présentons certaines des principales avenues qu'empruntent les élites, qui ont des intérêts variés, pour orienter les négociations. Puis, nous présentons la contribution que les articles de ce numéro font à l'avancement des connaissances sur les transactions foncières.

**Keywords:** land grabs; elite actors; global political economy; world food systems; corporate–state relations

Over the past 15 years, volatile food prices and widespread food insecurity have become the new norm: in 2006–2007 and again in 2011, food prices increased rapidly, doubling or tripling the cost of key food items and leading to protests and anti-government riots in over 60 countries (von Braun 2009; Brown 2011; McCarthy and Wolford 2011). In 2007, a historic 1 billion people were characterised as food insecure, and fears of continued population growth and changing diets generated concerns over geopolitical stability and global food supplies (Barrett 2013). As researchers, policy makers and politicians sounded an urgent call to double world food production by 2050 (FAO 2009), it became evident that the food crisis was embedded in (both produced by and producing) a rush for land. Dubbed a “global land grab” (Borras et al. 2011; de Schutter 2011), or the “new scramble for Africa” (Carmody 2011; Moyo 2011), media and activist reports highlighted the increasing number of public and private investors seeking to acquire large tracts of land for the stated purposes of increasing food and fuel production. In just one

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year, from 2008 to 2009, conservative estimates suggest that the amount of land changing hands increased 15-fold over the annual average for the preceding 40 years (Arezki, Deininger, and Selod 2011; Deininger et al. 2011). Indeed, among the most lucrative asset classes sought by investors today is so-called idle land (Geisler 2012), or what the World Bank calls “suitable land available” in countries characterised by a “high yield gap” (Deininger et al. 2011, xviii, 28).

The new dynamics of investment in land have inspired a significant scholarly literature spanning a variety of academic disciplines. Early analyses of the so-called global land grab attempted to characterise the basic elements of land “foreignisation” (Zoomers 2010), which world system theorists located within the structural transformations of the international food regime, focusing on new forms of global finance and geopolitical considerations (Araghi 2009; McMichael 2012). Another important line of inquiry has focused on conceptualisations and theories of land grabbing, working to disaggregate the term itself (Borras et al. 2011; Peluso and Lund 2011), questioning its historical newness (Moyo 2011) and investigating the complex role of different actors such as national states and local elites in facilitating new deals (see Wolford et al. 2013). There has also been strident international debate over the impact of large-scale land deals on the environment and local livelihoods and the appropriate means to regulate foreign investment in land (Deininger et al. 2011; de Schutter 2011).

A key concern of this literature is to understand why new deals are being made and where they are located. One popular response to these questions is a focus on the “drivers” of land deals, where drivers tend to be macro-level structural characteristics such as resource scarcity and unrealised production potential (Arezki, Deininger, and Selod 2011). While these studies have enabled us to gain a considerable understanding of the global context in which land deals take place, we argue that the language and definition of drivers is overly structural unless accompanied by an in-depth understanding of the interests motivating different actors in specific land deals. If we do not disaggregate interests, then we are forced to infer motivations from the seemingly objective or external characteristics of the investments and investors themselves, so that state-led investments in food production are assumed to be motivated by food security, corporate investments in bio-fuels presumed to be motivated by profit and so on. But, as this special issue demonstrates, the sources and reasoning behind land deals are often contingent and messy and lands are identified (and constructed) as “grabbable” for a wide variety of reasons. States, corporations and other elites come together despite their diversity – and even with contradictory aims – in ways that do not always or only poorly map on to a logical and clear set of supposed drivers. A focus on interests and motivations is thus a methodological injunction to examine the context-specific ways that land deals are forged, and how they fit into structural conditions that make land grabbing the emergent phenomenon it is.

In this introductory essay we first review the literature on land grabbing,<sup>1</sup> with a particular emphasis on drivers identified as important. Second, we examine in more depth four key actors – states, corporations, private investors and scientific experts – and suggest that an understanding of the interests motivating these actors helps to better explain why such land deals are occurring, and with what effects. Throughout the second section, we introduce the papers included in this special issue and bring together some of their key contributions.

### **Global trends and drivers of large-scale land acquisitions**

The full scope and scale of contemporary land acquisitions are difficult to assess, with data collection efforts hindered by a lack of transparency and reliability. The Land Matrix Global Observatory – a collaborative effort that collects data on land deals through independent verification, media reports and crowd sourcing – provides one of the most comprehensive sources of available information on current, large-scale land deals (Anseeuw et al. 2012; Anseeuw et al. 2013; Land

Matrix 2015). According to the Land Matrix, 37.9 million hectares of land have been acquired in developing countries since 2000, through 1,040 land deals<sup>2</sup> (2015). The primary targets of land deals are countries that are “among the poorest, are poorly integrated into the world economy, have a high incidence of hunger, and weak land institutions” (Anseeuw et al. 2012, 30). Target countries are predominantly net food exporters, and the majority of land acquired occurs in countries with high rates of hunger and GDP dependence on agriculture (Anseeuw et al. 2012, 30).

It is also significant that nearly half of the land targeted globally is already in agricultural production (Anseeuw et al. 2012). As a result, farming communities are in competition with investors for agricultural land, thus increasing the risk of displacement of local smallholders (Hilhorst and Nelen 2013). Furthermore, because the majority of large-scale land acquisitions are oriented toward production for export, often to the investor country (see Anseeuw et al. 2012, 12; Rulli and D’Odorico 2014), increased food production in the host country does not contribute to local food security and provides increased competition for smallholder farmers over resources and markets (Hilhorst and Nelen 2013). Such conditions are particularly concerning given how much food land acquired through large-scale deals can generate. In a recent analysis of Land Matrix data, Rulli and D’Odorico (2014, 4) found that “acquired land could feed with a ‘balanced diet’ [ ... ] a population of 371 million people”. If agricultural investments successfully closed the yield gap, more than 550 million people could be fed on acquired lands (Rulli and D’Odorico 2014, 5).

In terms of geographical concentration, Africa is the primary target of land deals, with figures ranging from two-thirds (van Vlerken, van der Waal, and van Westen 2011, 7) to more than 70 per cent (Deininger et al. 2011, xiv) of all large-scale land acquisitions taking place on the continent. The Land Matrix reports that 534 land deals are located in Africa, comprising approximately 23.1 million hectares. This is in comparison to 6.3 million hectares in Asia and just 3.6 million in Latin America (Land Matrix 2015.).

Land Matrix data also illuminate key features of the “land grabbers” themselves. By and large, those investing in land originate from three regions: countries in the Global North, emerging countries (such as Brazil, China, India, South Africa, Korea and Malaysia) and Gulf States (Anseeuw et al. 2012, 11). Almost all of these countries are relatively rich in finance capital (Zoomers 2010, 429) and a majority of the deals reported in the Land Matrix data originate from private companies (Anseeuw et al. 2012, 11).

Available data on large-scale land acquisitions tell us a great deal about the size and scale of land acquisitions, who the investors are, what forms investments are currently taking and the spatial dynamics of land deals. From these data, researchers have gleaned a set of conditions and interests considered to be driving new land deals. Among the most significant factors identified as driving the global rush for land include food security strategies by finance-rich and resource-poor countries (Cotula and Vermeulen 2009; Deininger et al. 2011; Zoomers 2010); export-oriented production of food, feed and biofuels (Anseeuw et al. 2012; Borrás and Franco 2012); timber and paper production (Bulkan 2014; Kenney-Lazar 2012); acquisition of resources, including metals, minerals and water (Hall 2011; Woertz 2013); land speculation (Daniel 2012); host countries’ desire to increase foreign direct investment, technological capacity and infrastructural development (Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Grandia 2013; Zoomers 2010); market and value chain consolidation (Amanor 2012); and changes in commodity markets with the emergence of private equity funds, leading to speculative investments (Campañale 2013; Humphreys, Sololmon, and Tumusiime 2013; van Vlerken et al. 2011). The protection of remaining global biodiversity and fears of impending climate change impacts have also served as justification for “green grabs”.<sup>3</sup> From campaigns such as “Adopt an Acre” to new climate mitigation strategies and biodiversity protection mandates, it increasingly

appears that “ecosystems are for sale” (Hall 2011; Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012, 238; McAfee 2011; Rocheleau 2015).

Demand for water is often identified as a particularly important driver in the rush for land. Anseeuw et al. (2012, 12) calculate that water consumption will increase by nearly 13 per cent in two-thirds of the countries in which land acquisitions for agricultural use are occurring. Reasons offered for “water grabs” range from food security concerns to profit maximisation. Gulf States’ involvement in Africa, for instance, is purportedly largely driven by shortages of water rather than shortages of land (Woertz 2013). Because many African states have water but lack economic and technical capacity, land deals between the two regions are characterised as “win–win” opportunities: Gulf States need water and African countries need infrastructure, capital and jobs (Woertz 2013). Borras, Fig, and Monsalve Suárez’s (2011) analysis of the ProCana sugar cane ethanol plantation in Mozambique’s Gaza Province provides a clear example of the ways in which water grabs are rationalised at the expense of local food security and livelihoods. Employing the discourse of “marginal” or “vacant” land, ProCana displaced local farmers and ranchers and set up a biofuel operation on some of the most productive and water-rich land in the region. In addition to controlling the land itself, ProCana secured water rights from the government. Together, this land and water grab resulted in substantial profits for the company but disastrous consequences for downstream farmers and herders due to the amount of water needed to sustain ProCana’s operations (Borras, Fig, and Monsalve Suárez 2011).

In addition to water, growing international demand for biofuels is identified as a key driver of contemporary land deals. The ProCana case is an illustrative example, but certainly not the only one. According to Land Matrix (2015) data, investments in biofuel-related land deals across the world comprise at least 16 per cent of all investments analysed (see also Anseeuw et al. 2012, 12). Regionally focused studies suggest comparable findings. In a study of proposed and approved land acquisitions since 2004 in five African countries – Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali and Sudan – Cotula et al. (2009) found that 44 per cent of all the land allocated was being utilised for biofuel production. Similarly, van Vlerken et al. (2011, 24) provide evidence that between 2000 and 2009, USD 25–35 billion was invested in biofuel crops in 16 countries around the world, with the majority of investments directed toward palm oil production in Indonesia and Malaysia and sugar cane and soybean crops in Brazil. Reasons for investing in biofuels range from energy security to rural development to export-oriented production (Cotula et al. 2009). However, while biofuels are often heralded as a renewable energy source, many fuel crops are not only a net energy loss<sup>4</sup> but are also ecologically destructive. Palm oil production, for example, has been a major driver of deforestation in South East Asia (Fargione et al. 2008). Likewise, soy production in Brazil is expanding the agricultural frontier into the Amazon (Fargione et al. 2008).

Though framed as a means of promoting food security, meeting global energy demands, bringing jobs and capital to local populations and facilitating infrastructural development and knowledge transfers, large-scale land deals have been critiqued as profit-oriented strategies that do not trickle down to local people and often have adverse effects on smallholders and local communities (Daniel 2012). Profit is, of course, most often identified in the literature as the primary driver of large-scale land deals, and is particularly evident in the financialisation of agricultural land, resources, and products (Daniel and Mittal 2010; Fairbairn 2014). The perception of “idle” land available for intensive production, relatively low costs of land in host countries and supportive local and national governments eager to receive foreign investment all purportedly drive land and agriculture investments (Campanale 2013; Daniel 2012; Geisler 2012). Spikes in food prices have also prompted farmland investments. Here, investing in land becomes a way to hedge against inflation (Cotula and Vermeulen 2009), diversify portfolios (Cotula

2012) and, with anticipated appreciation in farmland value, to exact increasing returns on farmland assets. Agricultural investments are anticipated to generate windfall profits, with forecasted returns as high as 25 per cent (Hawkins, cited in Cotula 2012, 666), and by 2020, the value of agricultural land is estimated to comprise “approximately 15–25% of the value of the global stock market” (Campanale 2013, 135).

Investment funds are becoming ever more important mechanisms in agricultural financialisation, from direct and indirect investment in farmland to property portfolios and investing in agricultural funds and agribusinesses to investments along the entire agricultural value chain (Cotula 2012). Already, in Africa, private equity funds currently account for the majority of new investment interests on the continent (Campanale 2013). Yet, while Africa represents a frontier for investment fund activities (with many deals still in the planning phase and yet to be enacted), investment funds are perhaps most active in South America. Brazil, in particular, is a key country attracting investment funds. According to an OECD report on private financial sector investment in farmland and agricultural infrastructure, approximately “one-third of vehicles investing in farmland globally have committed funds to Brazil” (HighQuest Partners 2010, 13). In addition to being an important destination for investment funds, Brazil is becoming a key player in farmland investment and agricultural restructuring abroad. Emergent relationships between Brazil and strategic African states – such as Mozambique (Wolford and Nehring 2015; Chichava et al. 2013), Ethiopia (Alemu 2013) and Ghana (Amanor 2013) – illuminate the ever-changing dynamics of agricultural investments between states, scientific experts, private investors and transnational agribusinesses.

This discussion of drivers elucidates the general, macro-level patterns underlying contemporary global land deals but does not necessarily reveal the specific motivations of particular firms, investors or state agents in particular places. Contemporary investments in land are shaped by a multitude of competing and even conflicting interests, desires and needs, from national security to missionary concerns for improvement and charity. This special issue aims to highlight the interests that motivate land deals – the expectations and experiences of those acquiring land – and the ways in which those interests are constructed and mobilised in specific times and places. The articles herein examine the changing discourses and meanings of land and resources among four (frequently overlapping) sets of principal actors: state actors; business/corporate actors; financial investors; and scientific experts. Focusing on motivations and experiences from the vantage point of elites sheds light on the subjective conditions under which land deals materialise, are avoided or fail. It also exposes the dynamic interactions within and between regions in the Global North and South, and internal relationships between state officials and their subjects.

### **An elite vantage point**

Motivations behind land deals are complex, nuanced and multi-layered; they differ depending on whether the land in question is domestic or offshore, what the relative value of land is compared with other assets in the global market place, how laws pertaining to the land penalise or incentivise acquisition and, among other things, whether the investor is a firm, an individual, a state or a non-profit organisation. For firms, access to land can be about risk-reduction, profits, balanced portfolios and secure access to resources early in the commodity chain. Transnational corporations may have additional motivations: market domination, tax sheltering, flexible labour power, avoidance of social and environmental regulations and, in general, offshore legal standing. State actors and scientific experts may have related but different motivations, ranging from national development strategies and environmental conservation to modernising and industrialising agriculture for export-oriented production. Yet these interests and motivations also intersect, and at times conflict, rendering land deals far more complex, unstable and contingent than



typically assumed. From the vantage point of elites, the articles in this issue explore these processes across a wide range of cases, including China, Sudan, Ethiopia, Brazil, Mozambique, Japan, the United Kingdom, eastern Europe and the United States. Together these articles suggest that while each set of actors may have different motivations, large-scale land deals almost always require the cooperation of different groups of elite actors: foreign states influence private and transnational corporations; international actors (states, corporations and investment funds) turn to states to map and execute their strategies (Wolford et al. 2013) and state actors and actions make possible the entrepreneurial, speculative or opportunistic actions of local-level elites. Examining the motivations and interactions between these elites within the broader macro-structural context helps to explain how land becomes “grabbable” and grabbed.

### *State actors*

There are diverse factors motivating state engagement with land grabbing. States may use land concessions as a means to exert sovereignty over unruly internal populations or border areas coveted by neighbours (Hall 2013). Not infrequently, states wield discourses of necessity, crisis, nationalism and demographic determinism over internal lands that seem underutilised or insubordinate to the national order (Makki 2014). Revenue is another key motivation for land concessions by states: by nationalising land and negotiating with investors, states create new sources of revenue and – perhaps – unreported income for state functionaries (German, Schoneveld, and Mwangi 2013; Hall 2013). Similarly, states may assume control of land for the purposes of creating Economic Security Zones, tariff-free zones or cheap labour enclaves (Levien 2013). Alternatively, states may wish to dedicate certain lands to biodiversity and formal conservation, or to resettlement zones for surplus populations (for example, Indonesia, South Africa), returned diasporas (Colombia, south Sudan) or everyday population growth (Brazil, Burundi, China). Finally, states can use their powers of eminent domain for what they call “land reform”, evicting some users for the benefit of others. This can be done with progressive intentions – asset redistribution, greater equity, unleashing smallholder productive energies (Berry and Cline 1979) – or for more conservative reasons, such as maintaining the status quo by dislodging politically restive populations or clearing frontiers for agribusiness to follow (Alston, Libecap, and Mueller 1999; de Janvry, Key, and Sadoulet 1997; Grajales 2013; Hall 2011; Oliveira 2013).

The rise in large-scale property transfers raises questions about the constitution, coherence and capacity of modern states. Several macro-level analyses of land deals suggest that they are concentrated primarily in “weak” or “fragile” states, in which “governance of the land sector and tenure security are weak” (Arezki, Deininger, and Selod 2011, 3; also see Bomuhangi, Doss, and Meinzen-Dick 2011; Deininger et al. 2011). While these patterns are instructive, they can also obscure other important dimensions of global land acquisitions. Neoliberal deregulation is giving way to aggressive state planning across the world, including in countries of the Global North in which land grabs are becoming more widespread, such as Canada (Sommerville 2013), eastern Europe (van der Ploeg, Franco, and Borrás 2015) and the United States (Kerssen and Brent 2014; Geisler and Kay forthcoming). Moreover, the literature on land deals tends to depict sovereign states, weak or otherwise, as accomplices or facilitators to land deals originating in the private sector. In fact, states themselves are aggressively competing for “land” in the global commons (including valuable sea beds and evolving sites for carbon and waste storage) and continue to confiscate, annex, and assert sovereign dominion over aboriginal lands, mineral estates and the “commonwealth” of water. By focusing on states as active agents in land deals, we see more clearly the ways in which inequalities within countries



condition land grabs, in some cases more so than inequalities between countries (Deininger et al. 2011; Fairbairn 2013).

Land grabs are rarely motivated by the interests of one actor. Rather, multiple and sometimes conflicting motivations are often in play (Goetz 2015; Jiao 2014). Chinese enterprises operating in Ghana, for instance, comprise an array of sectors – including agriculture, construction, retail and manufacturing – and myriad actors, from national banks and state-owned enterprises to transnational businessmen, engineers and technical experts (Jiao 2014). Not only do the interests of these investors and entrepreneurs vary, so do those of the elite counterparts with whom they negotiate in Ghana. Chinese motivations for acquiring or accessing land, then, are shaped by a host of contingencies, including the cultural and legal contexts in which enterprises operate and the specific relations between diverse actors and interests. In this issue, Ariane Goetz provides a comparative analysis of the multiple and sometimes conflicting motivations involved in African land grabs by Chinese and British state and corporate actors. Goetz argues that forms and processes of land acquisition are deeply influenced by the particular history, policies and dynamics within the respective investor countries. As Jiao (2014) and Goetz (2015) demonstrate, motivations do not emerge in a vacuum, but are historically and culturally specific, are subject to contingent and unstable relations between elite actors and are generated within particular political economic contexts.

Indeed, one cannot assume that elite actors within a country, or even the same sector, share similar goals or expectations of land deals. As Moreda and Spoor (2015) demonstrates in his analysis of large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia, there is a great deal of contestation between state and regional elites. Land investments and the commercialisation of agriculture have been framed by state elites as central to national development planning strategies. However, despite contestations and negotiations over land deals regionally, policies are determined at the federal level. As a result, federal state actors shape discourses around land investments and thus determine who can and cannot access land (Moreda and Spoor 2015, 234). While regional and state elites squabble over how these land deals are framed and negotiated, smallholder farmers currently living and subsisting off the land are rendered invisible, or worse: such groups are frequently excluded from negotiation processes and neither federal nor regional authorities take smallholders' needs or interests into account when leasing land to foreign investors or converting smallholder land into state-run plantations (Moreda and Spoor 2015). As is evident in Moreda and Spoor's analysis of land deals in Ethiopia, state officials and agents are certainly prominent actors in the global rush for land, but their engagement in these processes does not always take the form of direct land acquisitions. Nonetheless, states do considerable work within the broader political economic context to make land acquisitions possible.

### *Transnational corporations*

The motivations of transnational corporations are, arguably, the most readily apparent: profits, investment diversification, market expansion and concentration and short- as well as long-term asset accumulation. Seen through a wider lens, the land grab is an expression of a crisis of accumulation within the corporate food regime and has ushered in an unholy alliance of states and transnational corporations in what McMichael (2012, 2013) terms “security mercantilism”, or the offshoring of food, feed and fuel production. Regional capitals have featured prominently in this form of resource grabbing, especially in the case of Latin America, where “(Trans-) Latin American” corporations, partnering with Latin American states and international capital, are among the most significant investors in the region (Borras, Franco et al. 2012; Galeano 2012; Urioste 2012).

While there are novelties in these land-grabbing arrangements, they are part of a longer historical trend of agribusiness concentration in the Global South, where access to land is

complemented by labour contracts of various sorts. Amanor (2012) illustrates how the pineapple and cocoa industries in Ghana have increased their vertical integration, placing competitive pressures on smallholders and ostensibly freeing lands for the development of large estates. In North America, corporate investors have teamed up with First Nation bands in Saskatchewan to form large-scale “corporate mega farms” (Magnan 2012). This recent alliance accelerates the trend toward rationalisation, concentration, vertical integration and incorporation, thus deepening the marginalisation of the traditional family farming sector (Magnan 2012). Similarly, ProCana, the sugarcane ethanol plantation in Mozambique discussed above, relied on corrupt ties with political elites to secure hundreds of thousands of acres of land for biofuel production and export in Mozambique (Borras, Fig, and Monsalve Suárez 2011). Local farmers who were displaced from their land as a result of the acquisition were then incorporated into ProCana’s project as contract farmers. Land grabbing, in this case, included not only a transfer of land control but also the grabbing of labour and water resources via means of dispossession (Borras, Fig, and Monsalve Suárez 2011).

Focusing on specific land deals, we see messy local alliances between corporate actors, national elites and governments (Hall 2011; see also Hopma 2015; Geisler 2015). In an analysis of land grabs in southern Africa, Hall (2011) notes the multitude of business arrangements emerging around changes in land control, premised on mutually dependent relationships between corporations and state actors. Hopma’s (2015) work on failed Jordanian investments in Sudan illustrates a similar situation, in which agribusiness interests in expanding markets were shaped significantly by the character of state–corporate relations in the host country.

The articles assembled here examine not only the general motivations behind corporate land grabs but also the specific ways in which these motivations articulate with national development projects, local land tenure arrangements and state–corporate relations. Van der Ploeg, Franco and Borras (2015), for example, show how transnational corporations work together with national elites and governments. Eastern Europe is an attractive destination for transnational agribusinesses seeking to consolidate vertical and horizontal control of production chains: the costs of purchasing or leasing land are extremely low by European Union (EU) standards, and the companies benefit from land-use-related subsidies provided by the EU. Importantly, subsidies received by corporations are often secured through dubious (if not illegal) land contracts that are facilitated through corporate–state alliances (van der Ploeg, Franco and Borras 2015). In addition to agribusiness ventures, Europe is witnessing the rise of other forms of land transfers, from green energy projects (often established on agricultural land previously used for family farming) to real estate and tourism. As van der Ploeg, Franco, and Borras (2015, 157) note, such projects rely on the conversion of large tracts of agricultural land not only for the specific development project – for example, the Notre-Dame-des-Landes Airport in France – but also for the infrastructure necessary to sustain the projects.

### *Private investors*

Private investors, diverse as they are, are themselves often more interested in controlling land and its rents and revenues than in owning it, and for good reason. Ownership comes with obligations, taxes, liabilities, maintenance costs and a long catalogue of risks (market fluctuation, natural disasters, war, expropriation and adverse possession, to name a few). In part because of national restrictions on land ownership, the majority of recent offshore land deals in Africa are long-term lease agreements and contract-based extraction (Cotula et al. 2009; Oya 2012).

Most benefits contained in the rights that make up property can be attained through renting and leasing, especially when the latter is long term and renewable, without the encumbering

liabilities of full ownership (Geisler 2015). This is a powerful motivation in itself: access to land and resources with reduced risk. In the case of US investor-lessees, they enjoy the same insurance benefits as do investors with equity interests abroad through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) (Akhtar 2013). But as Hall (2013) reminds us, such arrangements occur with enormous variation; this well-known flexibility is in itself a second motivation for accessing someone else's land through leasing. Leases can be short or long term; they can be beneficial to labour and the environment or not; they are usually renewable and thus have many of the attributes of full ownership but at less cost. Furthermore, investment by way of leases has precedents across cultures over time, and is less controversial than purchase. The chances are good that national laws that prohibit foreign ownership (Hall 2013; Nolte 2013) will tolerate or even welcome lease arrangements (see Borrás, Fig, and Monsalve Suárez 2011; Hall 2011).

At the same time, investor engagement in the global land grab is often indirect. While there are certainly direct investments made in land (Borrás, Kay et al. 2012; Daniel 2012; Hall 2011; de Schutter 2011; van Vlerken, van der Waal, and van Westen 2011), investors engage in an array of profit-oriented strategies that do not entail direct control or ownership of land, including providing loans and holding considerable equity in companies with foreign landholdings (van Vlerken, van der Waal, and van Westen 2011), investing in agribusinesses and managing investment funds (Campanale 2013; Humphreys, Sololmon, and Tumusiime 2013) and promoting a favourable investment climate for private equity firms through global membership associations, "technical assistance" and "advisory services" to firms (Daniel 2012, 723), as well as improving management systems to create and secure land markets, be they formal or informal (Wolford and Nehring 2015). Investors may also provide technical knowledge and assistance to agribusiness projects (Hopma 2015), illuminating the multitude of ways in which the global land grab is not simply about securing access to land but also involves a range of activities that facilitate access to and profitability of land.

Geisler (2015) gathers together both direct and indirect elite motivations for owning and controlling land under the rubric of modern land rents. He highlights three interconnected interests (power, prestige and option value) that make land a compelling asset. Situated in free market environments in which the size of land holdings is unlimited, the result is land concentration. Concentration often means monopoly ownership of land and attendant resources, and aggravated social inequality. As other authors have done in surveying the impacts of land grabs (Deininger et al. 2011; Hall 2013), Geisler proposes unconventional land reform measures to staunch land concentration and the land grabbing that accompanies it.

To understand the multiple – direct and indirect – ways in which financial elites engage in the global land grab, Knuth (2015, 166) suggests that we shift our focus from analysing how global finance funds land acquisitions to an understanding of how "investors are developing new speculative or neo-rentier strategies around property in general". She suggests that more attention must be paid to how financial capital shapes the logics, dynamics and geographical patterning of contemporary land grabs. In tracing visions of accumulation premised on "yield gap" logic, Knuth demonstrates how "investment frontiers" are discursively constructed and, in turn, operationalised through revaluations of land and ecosystem services and the development of microinsurance and weather derivatives commodities, to name but a few. This work helps us to see how the financial sector itself is differentiated and undergoing constant change, shaped by as well as shaping a variety of motivations for land deals.

Importantly, investments associated with the global rush for land do not always succeed, and efforts to consolidate and control land may fail or stall indefinitely (White et al. 2012). As Hopma describes in this issue, Jordanian agricultural investment in Sudan failed to materialise, despite a lengthy and seemingly committed planning process. Investment in Sudanese agriculture was particularly desirable to Jordanian actors due to the proximity of the two countries (and

thus a relatively short travel and shipping times between the regions), the popularity of Sudanese meat in Jordan and favourable terms of trade between the countries. However, despite strong business interests in developing cross-national partnerships and a history of state–corporate relations in the region, the absence of a comprehensive food security policy in Sudan – in a context of rising international concerns over food security – and internal debates around the function of domestic food production (that is, either for export or self-sufficiency in food provision) ultimately led to the disintegration of the investment project under investigation (Hopma 2015).

### *Scientific experts and South–South cooperation*

Research and media attention on land deals have focused almost exclusively on Northern acquisitions of land in the Global South. However, as an emerging body of research is beginning to show, land grabs are far more widespread than initially thought, involving both North–North relations, as well as South–South partnerships. Whereas land deals occurring in the Global North have often been downplayed or obscured<sup>5</sup> due to opposition and local resistance (Keressen and Brent 2014; van der Ploeg, Franco, and Borras 2015; Safransky 2014), relations between countries in the Global South have been framed as mutually beneficial partnerships, with substantial support from governments and state officials (Chichava et al. 2013; Wolford and Nehring 2015). While large-scale land acquisitions are often present in South–South relations, they are often only one element in a much more complex set of processes. Chinese engagement in Africa, for instance, includes infrastructural and knowledge-based support, trade and “resource diplomacy” (as China seeks sources of natural resources to supply its domestic demand), commercial and state-backed loans and the establishment of Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers (Scoones, Cabral, and Tugendhat 2013; see also Buckley 2013). Brazilian investment in Africa has likewise primarily been through technical cooperation, transfer of agricultural knowledge and materials, extension of credit to African governments for national agricultural development and expansion of agricultural markets (Wolford and Nehring 2015). Scientific experts play an increasingly important role in these processes: as “exporters of knowledge”, scientists “promote agricultural development through germplasm exchanges, capacity training workshops, technology development and transfer and market intensification” (Wolford and Nehring 2015, 209).

While the language of “cooperation” is prevalent across a range of South–South partnerships, including Chinese and Brazilian investments in Ethiopia (Alemu 2013), Ghana (Amanor 2013) and Mozambique (Chichava et al. 2013), this discourse takes on very specific meanings in Brazilian–Mozambican partnerships. Brazil describes its activities in Mozambique as mutually beneficial agricultural development, framed through a narrative of shared experiences of colonialism, cultural and historical affinities between the regions and “moral debt” associated with Brazil’s role in the slave trade (Chichava et al. 2013, 21). Brazilian discourses further emphasise that partnerships with Mozambique are premised on equality and “fed by collaboration, solidarity and similarity” (Wolford and Nehring 2015, 208).

Brazil’s interest in Mozambican agriculture can be understood not only in terms of laying the ground work for private agricultural investment but also as a means of diplomatic solidarity (Chichava et al. 2013). Conceptualising diplomacy as a motivation for land deals highlights the important role of cultural context. In Jiao’s (2014) study, language and cultural barriers between Chinese enterprises and Ghanaian state actors proved to be constraining factors in establishing viable investment projects in Ghana. Similarly, Buckley (2013) notes how tensions between Chinese and Senegalese notions of work ethics, the role of technology and cultural differences in agricultural production pose challenges to current and future land deals. In contrast, Sudanese

officials encourage investments from Arab countries due to a shared “Islamic connection” (Hopma 2015).

## Conclusion

While we have separated the various elite actors engaged in the global land rush for analytical and methodological purposes, in reality these actors are deeply interconnected. As we have emphasised throughout, elite actors are profoundly influenced by the broader political economy in which they are embedded, as well as by political contingencies and negotiations between a multitude of actors on the ground. Though not the immediate focus of this special issue, the interests described above are clearly also relevant for non-elite groups determined to take back territory grabbed from them: displaced slum dwellers, enclosed commoners, the victims of red-lining in cities and green-lining in ecologically rich zones, swidden agriculturalists and migratory pastoralists, indigenous peoples dispossessed of their homelands and possibly even religious minorities marginalised by those who view them as apostates. These acts of land reclamation have their own mix of motivations.

Reading the papers in this special issue together, several key points emerge. First, most land investments are shaped by multiple motivations. Second, these motivations may conflict or be at odds with one another, and so understanding the broader balance of forces is essential for understanding the path from interests to actions. Third, interests in land may manifest not as land purchases or even as leases but as corollary investments in the infrastructure, technology and labour necessary to profit from the land. Fourth, motivations can change even in the short term because they exist in the context of other investment trends and changing environments. Fifth, motivations, even when stable, are highly contingent. Investment is often portrayed one way for public consumption in simplified sound bites but in fact is complex, secretive and ever-flexible to keep options open to changing conditions. As a result, motivations are often illegible, despite what investors say in public or even to their shareholders.

Given these five points, it is unreliable to infer motivations from end results. Though the two would seem highly correlated, the outcome – the land deal – may actually have undergone myriad changes along the way and be different from what even the principal actors expected. It also is not productive to read motivations from the rationales provided *ex ante* in the annual reports of firms, in the legal releases or enabling legislation by states or in media analyses. The articles in this special issue provide an opportunity to better understand what motivates elites to engage in (or forego) large-scale land deals in particular places. In doing so, they highlight the dynamic relations between actors, the contextual factors shaping their decisions and the often contingent nature of power.

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### Notes

1. In this introduction, we examine a variety of forms of large-scale land acquisitions that have been described in the literature as "land grabbing". As an overarching review, we use terms such as "large-scale land acquisitions", "land deals" and "land grabbing" interchangeably.
2. These figures comprise concluded land deals (oral agreements and signed contracts) and do not include land deals currently under negotiation or consideration. Furthermore, the figures for concluded deals are conservative, as 55 of the deals reported by the Land Matrix did not include data on the number of hectares in the contract and thus are unaccounted for in the figure provided above. Data accessed on 19 January 2015 from <http://www.landmatrix.org/en/get-the-detail/all/>
3. See, for example, John Vidal, "The Great Green Land Grab", in *The Guardian*, 13 February 2008.
4. The net energy loss of biofuel crops is particularly pronounced when taking into consideration the energy consumption of industrial crop production, post-harvest processing and fuel distribution (Borras, McMichael, and Scoones 2010; McMichael 2010; Weis 2010).
5. See the discussion of "pocket contracts" in van der Ploeg, Franco, and Borras (2015)

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