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## Large-Scale Land Acquisitions and Social Conflict in Africa

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## Abstract

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As foreign governments and corporations lease and purchase large tracts of arable land across the globe, in Africa, such large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) or ‘land grabs’ have allegedly provided the grievance behind protests, riots, coups, and other conflict from Mali to Madagascar. These land acquisitions not only displace smallholder farmers and pastoralists, often from allegedly marginal lands, but the land is subsequently used for food or biofuel export crops that are sent to wealthier countries, or forested for carbon mitigation. This dynamic deprives the local market of food production, often in countries that already experience high levels of food insecurity, and forces peasant farmers and pastoralists into the wage economy, where they have less control over their food sources and their subsistence is subject to the fluctuations of the global corporate food regime. LSLA target countries may also tend already to have poor land tenure security, and are frequently characterized by weak, corrupt, or authoritarian governments. It is unclear, however, whether land grabbing itself is a mechanism that has led to a significant increase in subnational social conflict, or whether land grabs have simply provided a focal point of organization for underlying unrest related to other factors. Using data on LSLAs from Land Matrix and data on conflict from the Social Conflict in Africa Dataset, this paper finds no significant correlation between LSLAs and the incidence of social conflict. The reliability of data on LSLAs leaves much to be desired, however, and so future research should focus on improving this data and also on untangling the social and political effects of LSLA deals through rigorous qualitative research.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The past decade has seen a vast increase in large scale land acquisitions (LSLAs), on a permanent or long-term basis, in developing countries for the purpose of export agriculture, biofuels production, and foresting for carbon mitigation, with acquisitions made mainly by national sovereign wealth funds or corporations based in the wealthier, more developed countries of the world, a phenomenon labeled by scholars and activists as ‘land grabbing’ (see e.g. Borras Jr. and Franco 2012; Daniel 2011; Thaler 2013). LSLAs directly threaten the food security and of persons in the target countries by closing off agricultural land that may previously have been under use by small farmers or pastoralists for subsistence or domestic food production and repurposing it for the production of food, fuel, other products for export, or reforestation projects (Cochrane 2011; De Schutter 2011). In many countries where food insecurity is already high, large percentages of the total arable land have been sold or leased to foreign investors (e.g. GRAIN 2012). Industrial agricultural projects implemented on ‘grabbed’ land also involve intensive use of water, depriving those in the surrounding areas of this scarce

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<sup>1</sup> DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT CITE OR CIRCULATE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

resource, and control of water may in fact be the primary goal in some LSLAs (Rulli, Savioli, and D’Odorico 2013; Woodhouse and Ganho 2011; Woodhouse 2012). Furthermore, LSLAs stand in direct contradiction of the ideal of ‘food sovereignty,’ “the right of communities, peoples and states to independently determine their own food and agricultural policies” (Beuchelt and Virchow 2012).

For all of these reasons, scholars and activists have argued that LSLAs cause or are likely to cause nonviolent or violent social conflict in the forms of protest, riots, or small-scale rebellion in response to this accumulation and enclosure of land (Arslan, Khalilian, and Lange 2011; von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009; Meinzen-Dick and Markelova 2009; Oakland Institute 2013; Thaler 2013, fn.23).<sup>2</sup> A study in Southeast Asia found that LSLAs led to increased conflicts over land, resulting in protests and even violent confrontations (Forest Peoples Programme 2013).

The LSLA deal agreed between the government of Madagascar with South Korean firm Daewoo Logistics for a 99-year lease of nearly half of Madagascar’s arable land for maize and palm oil production for export is often cited as a cause of the coup that toppled President Marc Ravalomanana, whose successor, Andry Rajoelina, promptly cancelled the planned deal (see Meinzen-Dick and Markelova 2009, 75; Thaler 2013). While the deal with Daewoo was a rallying cry against Ravalomanana, there were a host of other grievances against his administration, and the fact that the country’s planning minister, after the coup and the cancellation of the Daewoo deal, stated that “The [Daewoo] project by itself wasn’t bad and such a project is welcome...The approach was wrong” and that the new government would potentially welcome other LSLAs (Ramaro and Sguazzin 2009), suggests that the LSLA deal may have been only one of many factors behind the coup, or that it simply provided a convenient excuse or mobilizing point for anti-regime protest.

There have been case studies of different LSLA deals and examples provided of the conflicts they have provoked and protests mobilized against them (e.g. Hall 2011, 848), yet there has been no examination of whether or not LSLAs are systematically associated with conflict, or if LSLAs tend to occur in contexts that are already conflict-prone. While ideally one would be able to conduct an analysis testing whether or not a causal relationship exists between LSLAs and social conflict, this is prevented by a lack of reliable time-series data on LSLAs (see discussion below).

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<sup>2</sup> Domestic land grabs may also occur as a symptom of armed conflict, with armed actors taking advantage of their coercive power to accumulate land (Grajales 2011). Land grabbing may also be more prevalent in post-conflict environments where institutions are weaker and people have been displaced (van der Haar and van Leeuwen 2013).

Using the best data currently available, in this paper I conduct a cross-sectional correlational analysis, finding no significant relationship between LSLAs and social conflict in Africa, the site of almost half (47.55%) of recorded LSLA deals (International Land Coalition 2013). In a series of negative binomial regressions, I find no significant correlation between LSLAs and social conflict, though issues of data reliability and possible covariance of LSLAs with other risk factors for social conflict mean that the existence of such a significant relationship cannot be ruled out with any conclusiveness.

The paper proceeds with a discussion of the data and methods used and a review of the reasons from the literature for the selection of control variables used. The statistical analysis follows, and the results of this analysis are then discussed. The final section concludes with a summation of the findings and directions for the expansion of this paper and other future work.

### Data, Methods, and Possible Correlates of Conflict

#### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable is an event count of both nonviolent and violent social conflict events for each country, totaled over 2001-2011. These data are drawn from the Social Conflict in Africa Dataset, or SCAD (Salehyan et al. 2012). Using reports from newswires and including all African countries with a population over 1 million,<sup>3</sup> SCAD identifies ten types of social conflict events: organized demonstrations; spontaneous demonstrations; organized riots, spontaneous riots, general strikes; limited strikes; pro-government violence; anti-government violence (below the death threshold for inclusion as a civil conflict in the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Gleditsch et al. 2002)); extra-government violence; and intra-government violence (Salehyan et al. 2012, 507). For African countries, SCAD provides significantly improved coverage of social conflict events compared to the alternative Banks (2011) data (Salehyan et al. 2012, 509–510). Over the 2001-2011 time period, a total of 5,130 social conflict events were recorded in the 47 sample countries.

#### *Independent Variable of Interest*

Data on LSLAs have been compiled somewhat systematically by two groups, the Land Matrix coalition (Anseeuw et al. 2013; International Land Coalition 2013) and GRAIN, a small nongovernmental organization (GRAIN 2013). Land Matrix uses media and reports from think tanks, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as a crowd-sourcing approach followed by cross-checking to verify reports, resulting in a database with more complete coverage of known LSLAs, while GRAIN relies primarily on press reports

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<sup>3</sup> This results in the exclusion of Cape Verde, Comoros, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, and the Seychelles.

(Anseeuw et al. 2013; GRAIN 2013; Scoones et al. 2013, 471). Land Matrix “covers land transactions of over 200 ha that potentially entail the conversion of land use from local community use or important ecosystem service provision to large-scale commercial production” (Anseeuw et al. 2013, 523). The focus is primarily on acquisitions by foreign actors, a source of potential bias, though some acquisitions by domestic actors are included. Media reports and data on LSLAs tend to be biased toward a focus on Africa, rather than other regions (Borras Jr et al. 2012; Oya 2013, 507), so we should expect the Land Matrix data on African countries to be more reliable and complete than its information on other regions.

At present, Land Matrix includes information on 593 LSLA deals in the sample of 47 African countries during the 2001-2011 period. Not all of these deals have been implemented. Some reported deals are simply agreements on paper, some have already been abandoned, and others have been implemented, with crops are currently being cultivated and harvested on the purchased or leased land (Anseeuw et al. 2013; International Land Coalition 2013). It is, however, important to examine the impact of all LSLA deals, for “Even if deals are not implemented, they exacerbate pressures on land and can lead to displacements or a weakening of land rights for the local populations” (Anseeuw et al. 2013, 524).<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, precise dates are not provided for project agreements or implementation, and for many LSLA cases, no year is provided either for agreement or implementation. This makes time-series analysis of the data impossible in the dataset’s current form.<sup>5</sup> It is thus necessary to pool the LSLA data by country for the entire 2001-2011 time period to conduct a cross-sectional analysis, so this independent variable is the sum of reported LSLA deals in a country from 2001-2011.

### *Control Variables*

To control for the likelihood that countries that experience more conflict in one time period will probably continue to experience more conflict in the future, I include in the statistical models the number of SCAD events in the previous eleven years, from 1990-2000. Economic—GDP per capita (2005 US\$), GDP per capita growth, and GINI index—and demographic data—total population and urban population as a percentage of the total—were taken from the World Bank World Development Indicators, or WDI (World Bank 2013), averaging the available yearly measures from 2001-2011. GDP per capita provides a proxy for state strength, as well as a measure of overall well-being in the country, with low per capita income considered one of the most robust predictors of armed conflict across a range of studies (see Blattman and Miguel 2010). GDP per capita growth is taken as a measure of the economic modernization of a country, a transitional process viewed as conflictual by modernization theorists (e.g. Huntington 1968), though a *lack* of economic growth may also lead to conflict (Blattman and

<sup>4</sup> See also Anseeuw et al. (2011).

<sup>5</sup> GRAIN’s data suffer from the same problem.

Miguel 2010; Urdal and Hoelscher 2012). The GINI index measures inequality and thereby helps address arguments that relative deprivation is a cause of social conflict and broader armed conflict (e.g. Gurr 1970). Total population controls for the fact that, logically, we would expect larger countries to experience more conflict events at any given level of grievance or mobilizing factor (e.g. Fearon and Laitin 2003). Increased urbanization may also lead to increased conflict through mobilizational opportunities, concentration of population, and changing social and economic environments (e.g. Staniland 2010; Walton and Ragin 1990), so this is measured by the urban population as a percent of the total population.

The WDI were also used to take the average of each country's annual military expenditure as a percentage of GDP, a proxy for the state's capacity for repression, since repression and protest or other conflict tend to exist in a mutually reinforcing cycle (Carey 2006; Pierskalla 2009);<sup>6</sup> and, as a measure of land scarcity, which could be exacerbated by LSLAs and thus lead to conflict (Goldstone 2002; Gurr 1985; Homer-Dixon 1994), the number of hectares per person of arable land in the country were averaged.

Like military expenditure, political regime type is likely to affect both the willingness and ability of a government to repress dissent, as well as the opportunities available for citizens to mobilize nonviolently or violently (Fox and Hoelscher 2012; Hendrix, Haggard, and Magaloni 2009; Krause and Suzuki 2005; Pierskalla 2009; Urdal and Hoelscher 2012). Regime type is measured using the countries' average Polity2 scores, which are on a scale between complete autocracy (-10) and complete democracy (+10) (Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2013). As ethnic divisions may result in increased social conflict (e.g. Scarritt and McMillan 1995), Fearon's (2003) ethnic fractionalization index is used to control for this possible effect.<sup>7</sup> LSLA deals may be more likely in countries with weak land tenure security (Arezki, Deininger, and Selod 2011), and poor protection of land rights could on its own result in increased social conflict (Boone 2013; Peters 2004), so land tenure security was measured using the Millennium Challenge Corporation's Land Rights Indicator score (MCC 2013). Finally, as recent research has argued that cellular telephone access facilitates popular mobilization and social and armed conflict (e.g. Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013), a measure is included of the average number of cellular phone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants from the data of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU 2013). Summary statistics on the dependent variable and covariates are provided in Table 1.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to repression, protest may also exist in a mutually reinforcing cycle with policy reform (Bratton and van de Walle 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Posner's (2004) measure of politically-relevant ethnic groups (PREG) is more precise, but it does not cover the North African countries or Eritrea, reducing the sample size in statistical analyses, and it was not found to significantly affect the statistical results.

### Methods

The SCAD data are event count data and are overdispersed (see Hendrix and Salehyan 2012), so negative binomial regression is used for analysis. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, these regression analyses can explore only correlative and not causal relationships. The limitations of the Land Matrix data (Edelman 2013; Oya 2013) also mean that the results presented below should be interpreted with great caution and as only a preliminary attempt to explore the potential relationship between LSLAs and conflict, with more thorough analyses only becoming possible with improved LSLA data.

### Analysis

With social conflict events from 2001-2011 as the dependent variable, a series of negative binomial regressions was run in R to test the relationship of LSLAs to social conflict, relative to other hypothesized correlates from the literature. All results are presented in Table 2. Model 1 ( $\chi^2 = 0.073$ ) presents a baseline model, leaving out land-related variables (LSLAs, land rights, and arable hectares per capita). Social conflict in the previous period of 1990-2000 is significantly positively associated with social conflict, as is total population, though with a very small coefficient. The economic variables are all significantly and negatively correlated with social conflict, as are Polity2 scores and military expenditures.

Model 2 ( $\chi^2 = 0.058$ ) adds the LSLA count variable to the baseline model. LSLAs are weakly, negatively, and insignificantly correlated with social conflict in this model. The negative relationship between Polity 2 score and social conflict is slightly weakened, but other results remain unaffected. Model 3 ( $\chi^2 = 0.046$ ) adds the land rights indicator to Model 2 to account for the potential that LSLAs' relationship with conflict could be mediated by a mutual relationship with land tenure insecurity. Neither LSLAs nor land rights scores are significantly correlated with social conflict. Previous conflict and total population remain significantly positively associated with social conflict, while the economic variables and military expenditure remain significantly negatively correlated with social conflict, though the relationships are slightly weaker than in Model 1. Inclusion of arable hectares per capita in Model 2 or Model 3 (results not shown) did not significantly change the results of these models.

Model 4 ( $\chi^2 = 0.043$ ) removes LSLAs while leaving the land rights indicator in the regression, and finds that model fit was not improved by the inclusion of LSLAs in the model. Without controlling for LSLAs, the results remain essentially the same as those in Model 3, with slightly different coefficients for the covariates.



<b>Table 1. Summary Statistics</b>		
<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Number of Countries</b>
LSLAs	12.62	47
SCAD events 1990-2000	77.19	47
SCAD events 2001-2011	109.15	47
MCC Land Rights Indicator score	0.60	45
Ethnic Fractionalization (Fearon)	0.66	47
Arable land (hectares per capita)	0.25	47
GDP per capita (2005 US\$)	1383.72	47
GDP per capita growth rate	2.16	47
Polity2 score	1.35	47
Military expenditure (% of GDP)	2.39	47
Population, total	19,832,883	47
Urban population (% of total)	38.49	47
GINI coefficient	42.78	47
Cellular telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants	27.48	47

## Discussion

The results presented above fail to find any significant correlation between LSLAs and social conflict over the 2001-2011 period. There thus does not appear, from the available evidence, to be a systematic relationship between LSLAs and social conflict. Among the other covariates, previous conflict and total population were consistently positively and significantly correlated with social conflict, suggesting that countries may experience cycles of conflict or that conflict may become normalized within a society (e.g. Collier and Hoeffler 2004, 15–16), and that countries with larger populations do, as expected, experience significantly more social conflict, though the correlation is small. GDP per capita and economic growth were both negatively correlated with social conflict, in keeping with findings from the civil wars literature that conflict is more likely in more underdeveloped and more economically stagnant countries (see Blattman and Miguel 2010), a relationship found for levels of social conflict (Urdal and Hoelscher 2012) and homicide (Fox and Hoelscher 2012) as well. Inequality as measured by GINI index was consistently significantly and negatively associated with social conflict, contradicting relative deprivation theories of conflict (e.g. Gurr 1970). Polity2 score was consistently significantly and negatively associated with conflict, suggesting that more

Table 2: Cross-Sectional Analyses

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	SCAD events 2001-2011			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
LSLAs		-0.003 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.005)	
Land Rights Indicator			-0.374 (0.978)	-0.442 (0.960)
SCAD events 1990-2000	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)
Ethnic fractionalization	-0.449 (0.404)	-0.407 (0.411)	-0.386 (0.428)	-0.424 (0.419)
GDP per capita (2005 US\$)	-0.0002** (0.0001)	-0.0002** (0.0001)	-0.0002* (0.0001)	-0.0002* (0.0001)
GDP per capita growth	-0.141*** (0.043)	-0.136*** (0.044)	-0.133*** (0.048)	-0.136*** (0.047)
Polity2	-0.039** (0.020)	-0.039* (0.020)	-0.035* (0.021)	-0.036* (0.021)
Military expenditure (% of GDP)	-0.102*** (0.032)	-0.103*** (0.032)	-0.092** (0.037)	-0.090** (0.037)
Population	0.00000*** (0.000)	0.00000*** (0.000)	0.00000*** (0.000)	0.00000*** (0.000)
Urban population (% of total)	0.011 (0.009)	0.011 (0.009)	0.009 (0.011)	0.008 (0.011)
Gini index	-0.041*** (0.013)	-0.040*** (0.013)	-0.037** (0.015)	-0.037** (0.015)
Cell phones per 100 persons	-0.005 (0.012)	-0.005 (0.012)	0.0002 (0.016)	0.001 (0.016)
Constant	6.166*** (0.682)	6.159*** (0.681)	6.142*** (0.952)	6.178*** (0.944)
Observations	47	47	45	45
Log Likelihood	-235.499	-235.352	-225.017	-225.117
$\theta$	3.333*** (0.710)	3.354*** (0.714)	3.230*** (0.700)	3.216*** (0.697)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	492.999	494.704	476.034	474.235

Note:

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

autocratic regimes are more likely to experience social conflict, though this relationship is not very strong, and recent studies find that it is regimes at the middle of the range, hybrid regimes or anocracies, that experience more and more violent conflict (Pierskalla 2009; Urdal and Hoelscher 2012). Military expenditure was also consistently significantly and negatively correlated with social conflict, suggesting that military expenditure may have a deterrent effect in preventing social conflict, or may enable repression that quickly suppresses social conflict when it emerges.

The correlation between land rights and social conflict was not significant, but it was in the negative direction.<sup>8</sup> As LSLAs have been found to be more likely to occur in countries with poor land tenure security, this could still provide a link between LSLAs and conflict if it can be examined with better data. No significant correlations were found social conflict and ethnic fractionalization, urban population, or cellular telephone subscriptions. Given that a cross-sectional analysis was necessitated in this paper by the nature of the LSLA data, the relationship between other independent variables and social conflict can better be examined using time-series analysis to account for temporal variation.

## Conclusion

This paper has provided a preliminary test of the potential relationship between large-scale land acquisitions, or land grabs, and social conflict. Using the best data available and examining the region with the best and most reliable data on both LSLAs and social conflict, no significant correlation is found between LSLAs and social conflict. Ignoring all other variables, the bivariate correlation between LSLAs and social conflict is only 0.049. This suggests that while, in individual cases, LSLA deals may lead to incidents of social conflict, they are likely co-occurring with other correlates of social conflict. To test this hypothesis, in developing this paper further, I will examine press accounts and NGO reports on social conflict events reportedly related to LSLA deals in order to determine what other correlates of social conflict, as found in this paper, were or were not also present. I also plan to test the findings of Arezki, Deininger, and Selod as to the correlates of LSLA deals themselves (2011).

The problems with the Land Matrix data and the difficulty in using them for statistical analysis confirm Oya (2013) and Edelman's (2013) concerns about the use or misuse of these data, even when avoiding any calculations involving the areas in hectares of LSLA deals. In this paper, I have attempted to be clear about the limitations of the data and the preliminary and superficial

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<sup>8</sup> The null finding of no significant correlation for the relationship between arable land scarcity and social conflict offers some support for Theisen's (2008) finding of a null relationship between resource scarcity and armed conflict.

nature of the statistical results in order to avoid false pretensions to “scientificity” (Edelman 2013, 488). LSLAs appear to be a feature that will endure in the current ‘food-feed-fuel’ agroindustrial complex (McMichael 2012) and thus it is imperative to continue monitoring their social effects, though to do so beyond a case-by-case basis will require improved data collection. This will enable not only a more systematic test of the potential link between LSLAs and social conflict, but can also provide more reliable evidence for scholars, activists, governments, and investors attempting the extremely difficult (Borras Jr. and Franco 2010; De Schutter 2011) task of acquiring large tracts of agricultural land in developing countries in a ‘socially responsible’ manner (Robertson and Pinstrip-Andersen 2010).

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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