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Scramble for land in Africa: Indian investments to buy land in Africa

Abstract

This term paper tries to discover the major reasons behind the current scale of foreign investments in productive land Africa – in particular those of Indian national and multinational corporations and the Government of India. It aims at assessing the impact of such foreign investments on the socio-economic, political and environmental spheres of the nations in which these investments are made. An attempt is made to identify the role of Indian government in promoting and sometimes directly undertaking these investments through diplomatic and strategic relations. An assessment is made of the impact of these investments on the local population and what these investments potentially mean for the corporations undertaking them. The paper concludes by trying to ascertain the broader convergence of socio economic, ecological and food crises.

Introduction

Contemporary foreign investment activity in African countries is not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, it isn't greatly detached from the neo-colonial form of foreign investment inflows that impacted the economies of East Asia in the post-world war period, followed by those of South America in the 70s and 80s, followed by those of China and South Asia (India) in 80s and 90s. The trends of FDI inflows in the continent of Africa show two major jumps: one from 1994 to 1995-99 and the other from 2004 to 2005-09 (Mijiywa, 2015). To be sure, the same source indicates a net decrease in percentage terms (of total worldwide net foreign investments) over the period considered. However, much of that could be attributed to speculative and rapid movements in the modern financial markets.

Table 1: Trends of FDI inflows in Africa and across African sub-regions over the period 1970-2009

	1970-74	1975-79	1980-84	1985-89	1990-94	1995-99	2000-04	2005-09
				FDI inflows (million US$)				
Africa	24.4	22.6	30.6	55.4	83.6	171	340	1,060
Sub-regions								
Central Africa	15.7	29.9	37.8	41.3	31.2	147	647	1,670
Eastern Africa	7.6	8.6	6.4	12.7	19.3	70.7	106	265
Northern Africa	35.1	26.3	74.4	224	278	392	807	3,420
Southern Africa	95.7	-11.8	62.6	-4.4	47.7	369	544	1,280
Westerns Africa	26.7	40.1	26.9	61.3	115	147	177	613

Table 1 Source: Mijiyawa 2015

The first jump indicates the advent of contemporary large-scale neo-colonial investments in Africa post the global economic recession of 1990s which was marked by opening up of many a developing economy to foreign inflows. The second underscores the greater push inside the continent of Africa as bilateral, multilateral and institutional foreign development aid to African economies has slowed down, particularly after the financial meltdown of 2008. It is this phase of foreign investment – particularly in the context of agricultural land and water resources – that this paper attempts to investigate.

What sets this phase apart from those of Latin American and Asian economies is the boisterous emphasis on acquiring direct control over the real economy – natural resources in general and arable land and water bodies in particular – rather than indirectly through corporations and the financial sector. Another major differentiating characteristic is the role of the corporations from developing economies (those of India and China) besides those of Western Europe and North America in promoting these aggressive investments. These investments are greatly reminiscent of colonial styled set up of agricultural plantations with a rapidly evolving system of monoculture. The reason for the shift is twofold: Firstly, the increasing prices of agricultural raw material and food crops post the 2008 meltdown made governments take cognizance of increasing food security of their nationals. The decreasing profits of multinational companies from the fluctuating costs and availability of agricultural raw material prompted them to secure resources on foreign shores of Africa. The decreasing yield in domestic sectors due to declining soil fertility borne of excessive fertilizer use, overexploitation of arable land and increasing water scarcity is a grave concern for these governments.

Secondly, North American and The EU & Continental Europe’s policy of transitioning to biofuels as a replacement for fossil fuel has converged to growing biofuel crops in Africa. For example, the EU has set a target of achieving 10 per cent transport fuel consumption supply from renewable sources by 2020. This in turn has come about due to greater recognition of reducing carbon emission in their own countries – as is the popular narrative – and to reduce dependence on imported fuel energy from oil exporters: sources which again, can be unreliable in terms of future availability and possibility of price rise.

The broader narrative has been the convergence of environmental, socio-economic, political and food security crises faced by the world populace in general in view of the increasing population and greater stress on natural resources all the while inequity of distribution and access to basic necessities keeps getting worse.

The catchphrase land-grabbing has been used in the popular narrative of both research and journalism to indicate all issues surrounding this race to secure the natural resources of African countries as well as the oft unethical behaviour of foreign corporations in altogether ignoring environmental and socio-economic development of the indigenous populace in pursuit of securing returns on their investments. The broad theme of discussion is succinctly illustrated in the following quote:

> "we find land grabbing to be a more useful and generic concept, which we define to include exploration, negotiations, acquisitions or leasing, settlement and exploitation of the land resource, specifically to attain energy and food security through export to investors' countries and other markets." (Matondi, Havnevik, Beyene, & Afrikainstitutet, 2011)

To this end, following important issues are discussed in the paper:

A. Historical role of Indian corporations and government in land acquisition and allied investments in Africa
B. Current trends of Indian land acquisition in Africa
C. Socio-economic impact on the indigenous population
D. Role of African institutions and civil society

The paper concludes with a view to possible direction of future narrative and viable course of policy action.

Historical role of Indian corporations and government in land acquisition and other investments in Africa

Africa is agriculture's final frontier (Thurow, 2010). With the world population projected to cross nine million by 2050 and the global urban population having overtaken rural population in 2007, the agrarian crises that surround production powerhouses like North America, India, Brazil and China are increasingly becoming a worldwide problem. The green revolution that pushed back a Malthusian catastrophe in the economies of Asia and Latin America while also drastically reducing world food prices by limiting export opportunities of erstwhile colonial superpowers did not adequately take shape in Africa. Combined with the doctrine of structural adjustment and fiscal austerity that came with development aid funds from multilateral institutions, governments abandoned the agricultural sector, especially the subsidy support to small farmers. This also came at a time when foreign aid for small farmers dropped – official development assistance plummeted from $8 billion in 1984 to $3.4 billion in 2004 (in 2004 dollars). Thus, space was created for the private sector to undertake major investments in agriculture, which as history tells us, is often risky and requires considerable infrastructural support – an activity neither viable nor adequately profitable for the small African private sector. With African governments increasingly coming under pressure to achieve peace, development and better food security for their nationals, many chose to ally with large multinational corporations, hoping to quickly absorb modern farming practices along with infrastructural and developmental investments. On the rationale stated earlier, Indian multinationals also put their hats in this lottery. Of course, the tragi-comical production glut followed by famines within two years in East Africa (Ethiopia, where Indian companies are major investors) also made short term options more attractive. The global narrative has also lent itself, with the famous World Bank report on reducing global hunger advocating foregoing of earlier austerity measures in favour of greater agricultural investment.

To be sure, corporations have no nations. Domestic private sector of Africa has participated in this melee, as a stakeholder in or collaborator with larger foreign corporations and sometimes independently; often with major stockholdings. Therefore, the involvement of the Indian multinationals must be viewed in the context of production conditions in Indian agriculture, the energy and food security of the burgeoning Indian middle class and the involvement of Indian government.

From the corporations' point of view, the upward trend in rising raw material prices of both food and non-food crops mean greater profits in upstream production activities and lower relative risks compared to downstream processing and distribution activities. With the Indian population having become accustomed to higher food prices in the past decade, there is a considerable opportunity for food imports despite the import costs. Hence, a lot of traditional processing and distribution firms in India have tried to vertically integrate into crop, seed and fertilizer production, with obvious added surplus from globally linked value chains. Speaking to the media in 2011, S.N Pandey – an executive with the Lucky Group – was quoted as saying, "The cost of agricultural production in Africa is almost half that in India. There is less need for fertilizer and pesticides, labour is cheap and overall output is higher." Speculative investment into large land holdings has also followed, often with governmental support.

There are also pull factors driving these forays, with the Indian Ministry of Agriculture receiving proposals from several African nations to undertake commercial agriculture activities on their lands, which were forwarded to various farmer and agri-business associations in India (Rowden, 2011).

The Indian government has provided ample support by setting up farmer trade missions and lending a helping hand in major agri-business summits. India also entered into various forms of agreements: Public Private Partnerships (PPP), supporting private M&As with local firms, expertise and financial aid in conventional new greenfield DFIs, various bilateral trade treaties and associated DTAAs. The government has also extended credit support through the Exim Bank via soft loans and Lines of Credits to both African governments as well as Indian corporations. On the policy front, government has liberalized outgoing FDIs by Indian companies.

The Indian government has utilized historically amiable diplomatic relations and trade ties with African countries to steamroll the way for increasingly aggressive foreign land acquisition by Indian firms; sometimes acquiring land directly for development projects. To illustrate the point, multilateral trade between India and Africa shot from $5 billion in 2002 to about $40 billion in 2009, the period during which a lot of major acquisitions and long-term land leasing deals were clinched.

Current trends in Indian land acquisition in Africa

Ethiopia is taken to be the watershed moment in the discourse surrounding Indian land investments in Africa. India is the largest foreign investor in land and agriculture in Ethiopia, with approved investments to the tune of $4.4 billion as of 2011. Out of more than 3.5 million ha land leased to foreign nationals, at least 1.9 million ha are held by Indian entities, with 90 per cent of investment being private sector – through multinationals, private investors and large-businesses. The most infamous of Indian investments in Africa: that by Karuturi in the Gambella district with the abundant water resources of the Baro-Akobo water basin is a case in point. More than 80 companies hold direct land purchases or leasing agreements with African nations to the tune of $2.4 billion (Rowden, 2011). Table 2 provides a concise assessment of these investments.

Table 2: A Sample of Indian Land Investments overseas (Rowden 2011)

	Indian Company	**Country**	**Details**
1.	Karuturi Ago Products Plc.	Ethiopia	Acquired 100,000 ha in the Jikao and Itang Districts of the Gambela Region for growing palm, cereal and pulses, with conditional option to acquire another 200,000 ha. Karuturi Ago Products is a subsidiary of Karuturi Global Ltd.
2.	Ruchi Soya Industries	Ethiopia	Acquired 25-years lease for soyabean and processing unit on 152,649 ha in Gambela and Benishangul Gumaz States
3.	KS Oils	Indonesia	Acquired 130,965 ha at Kalimantan for palm plantation; This is the third tranche of land acquired by the company after it previously acquired 210,039 ha in two deals in 2008 and 2009
4.	Verdanta Harvests Plc.	Ethiopia	Acquired a 50-years lease for 5,000 ha in the Gambela region for a tea and spice plantation
5.	Chadha Agro Plc	Ethiopia	Acquired up to 100,000 ha in Guji Zone in Oromia Regional State for a sugar development project
6	Sterling Group	Argentina	Purchased a 2,000-hectare olive farm and another 17,000 ha for growing peanuts
7.	Olam International	Argentina, Gabon, Uruguay	Acquired 17,000 ha in Argentina to grow peanuts, 300,00 ha in Gabon for palm oil and 16,000 ha in Uruguay for dairy farming. Olam is a Non-Resident Indian firm based in Singapore
8.	Varun International	Madagascar	Subsidiary Varun Agriculture Sarl leased or purchased 232,000 ha to grow rice, corn and pulses
9.	Solvent Extractors Associations of India	Latin America (Uruguay, Paraguay)	A consortium of 18 vegetable oil companies was set up to acquire lands in Latin America to grow soyabean and sunflower.
10.	Uttam Sucrotech	Ethiopia	Won a $100-million contract to expand the Wonji-Shoa sugar factory
11.	Shree Renuka Sugars	Brazil	Purchased sugar and ethanol producer Vale Do Ivai S.A. Acucar E Alcool in November 2009 for $240 million, including its 18,000 ha of land for sugarcane; and acquired a 51-percent stake in Equipav SA Acucar e Alcool fr $329 million that owns two sugar mills and has 115,000 ha of cane growing land in south-eastern Brazil
12.	McLeod Russel India	Uganda	Purchased tea plantations worth $25 million, including Uganda's Rwenzori Tea Investments; McLeod Russel India is owned by BM Khaitan
13.	ACIL Cotton Industries	Brazil, Congo and Ethiopia	Plans to invest nearly $15 million (Rs 68 crore) for land leases to start contract farming pulses and coffee in Brazil, Congo and Ethiopia
14.	MMTC Ltd (state-owned)	Kenya and Tanzania	Plans to (as of Oct 2010) grow pulses
15	Adani Group	Africa, Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia and Malaysia	Plans to (as of Oct 2010) set up farms to cultivate edible oil and pulses
16	Neha International	Ethiopia	Leased land in the Oromia region — in Holetta for floriculture and near Bako for rice, maize, oilseeds and pulses
17	Sannati Agro Farm Enterprise Pvt. Ltd.	Ethiopia	Acquired a 25-years lease on 10,000 ha in Dimi District, Gambela Region, for the cultivation of rice, pulses, and cereals
18	Jay Shree Tea & Industries	Rwanda, Uganda	Acquired two tea plantations in Rwanda and one in Uganda; Jay Shree Tea & Industries is controlled by BK Birla
19	BHO Bio Products Plc.	Ethiopia	Acquired 27,000 ha to grow cereal, pulses and edible oil crops
20	ACIL Cotton Industries	Brazil, Congo and Ethiopia.	Announced plans in January 2011 to invest nearly $15 million (Rs 68 crore) to start contract farming of crops like pulses and coffee in Brazil, Congo and Ethiopia.

Besides growing food crops that in modern agriculture markets are lucrative cash crops (like rice and wheat), Indian companies hold interests in cotton, palm oil, oilseeds and horticulture. Considerable sugarcane plantations have also come about. Indian companies were also courted by the government of Ethiopia for infrastructural projects in construction of over 2000 km of railways and road networks over the period of 2011-2016.

The size of land allocations can vary vastly, with a mean of 7,500 ha and a median of 2,000 ha in Ethiopia; though some allocations can be as large as 150,000 ha (Cotula & Vermuelen, 2009). As of 2011, the government of Ethiopia had planned to lease a further 2 million ha of land identified as marginal unirrigated or unutilized land, where unutilized can potentially include land that is not being to proper and efficient use by the locals.

This of course coincides with a larger neoliberal push into acquiring real assets after the 2008 financial meltdown; if not directly then certainly through strategic partnerships and investment into Indian, Chinese, Arab and Gulf countries undertaking such investments in Africa. Often, a lot of these investments funds are routed through tax havens like Mauritius and Singapore and even local contracts entered into by these companies allow full repatriation of the profits accruing to these companies. This routing of high level investments through tax havens along with greater liberalization and the obsolescence of 2008 crisis induced stigma around use of financial leverage has emphatically enhanced the borrowing power of Indian companies on global capital markets. Many Indian and overseas venture capitalists and investment funds have participated via these routes. Yes Bank, for example, had major investments with a $150 million farmland investment in Tanzania in 2011.

It must however be understood that no such heavy excursion across foreign shores, with or without state sponsorship of the home government, can occur without a considerable decline in the legitimacy of such activities on the home shores. Drawing definitive parallels from history can be perilous; yet the similarities with the industrial revolution led colonial epochs is striking. With increasing political and civil unrest over large scale acquiring of land by major business firms within India itself – the cases of Nandigram in West Bengal in 2006 or the combined socio-economic and environmental unrest over Sardar Sarovar and Tehri dams being poignant examples – exploitation within the country has become increasingly inimical in the 21st century. The push to foreign shores with the larger demand of commodities being unaffected by backlash over such unrest in home markets makes these investments all the more attractive. There is also a need to popularize and legitimize these events through media and PR activities. This legitimacy in essence is achieved through projecting investment in Africa as a humanitarian effort towards upliftment of the local population.

Socio-economic impact on the indigenous population

The advent of contemporary economic relationships between African countries and India can be traced back to the burgeoning trade of mineral resources and agricultural produce that has been historically exported from Africa to India and the reverse export of manufactured commodities – the sort of trade relationship that naturally favours India. Over the years, the Exim Bank of India has extended major development credit (to the tune of $558 million in 2006) to West African Economies. Besides, India has traditionally enjoyed favourable ties with Eastern and Southern African countries owing to the network of Indian diaspora that resides in these regions (Broadman, 2008). The “Focus Africa” program launched in 2002 acted as a forum for promoting bilateral ties in trade and economic co-operation, besides also acting as a way for India to secure co-operation across global forums like WTO. To quote, “… India has supported the New Economic

Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) initiative with 200 million dollars for promoting projects related to African economic integration. India's willingness to become even more financially engaged and invest heavily in Sub-Saharan Africa was underscored by the Addis Ababa Declaration, signed at the Second India-Africa Forum Summit in May 2011 (Michael & Baumann, 2016)

Historically too, India had well established political relations with African countries. The importance of these relationships in the present context was to facilitate significant land agreement ties that Indian companies could formulate; leveraging the state machinery to project a sense of trust and worthiness of Indian companies in conducting its business ethically and to the mutual benefit of the indigenous population (Malghan & Swaminathan, 2008).

A tectonic shift in perception around land grabbing as a serious moral and economic hazard to that of acquiescence and tacit compliance can only be engineered on projecting it as an "opportunity" for rural development. According to Barras and Franco, this can be achieved through instituting an international "Code of Conduct", with obstacles being identified in achieving the right investment rather than that of forceful resource grabbing (Borras Jr. & Franco, 2010). It constitutes of four key elements:

I. There is a need for better land management to solve resource contestation and conflicts.
II. Satellite imaging led new revelations of "reserve agricultural land" that could be harnessed without disturbing local food production and land rights
III. Emphasis on potentially harmful effects of large scale agricultural investments undermining poor people's access to land. Also, potentially harmful effects of merciless use of top soil and green revolution technology with dangerous environmental impacts.

IV. Crucially, the aforementioned concerns are indicated to be curable with right farm practices and greater rural development absorbing those potentially displaced.

Conceding that in reality the impact of these activities can be sufficiently stark is akin to calling into question the very validity of these land deals. The method indicated to deal with these potential 'risks' in the dominant narrative is through proper policy framework that places greater checks and balances on the contracted party to fulfil its obligations regarding proper rehabilitation and environmental safety.

> "A beneficial policy environment would include: well-defined land rights and authorities, with an emphasis on a private property rights system; clear identification of land that is available and clear mechanisms for transfer of public land rights; improved investment climates through rule of law and contract security; evidence-based agricultural policies in relation to incentives, markets, technologies, and rural infrastructure; facilitation of contract growing and out-grower schemes; enhanced market information systems; improved knowledge and extension services (including rural banking); and decentralized (community-based) negotiation." (Borras Jr. & Franco, 2010)

In truth, these suggestions run into obvious practical problems of implementations, besides implicitly assuming away intricate complexities of historical land rights. That these work within a framework that necessitates these investments with more than amiable return on investment is obvious. However, the availability of reserve agricultural land itself is questionable. Taking the example of Kauruturi Plc, the company's investment in the Baro basin – which was indicated to be unutilized by the indigenous population – ironically failed over the same parameter on which it was touted. The abundant water resource from the basin resulted in severe floods over any plantation activity that was undertaken by the company in this basin leading to unrecoverable losses and eventual abandonment of the project. Moreover, the data regarding satellite imaging of these lands itself is unreliable. Thirdly, the pastoralists communities that derive their livelihood from these resources are yet to evolve formal private property rights which are necessary for capitalist modes of production. More importantly, clear and secure property rights by themselves are not sufficient to protect the rural poor. Fourthly, in practice it is next to impossible to maintain complete transparency and equity in mega land deals with multiple stakeholders. Also, transparency by itself does not imply accountability, with rules often bent to suit the needs of the contracting corporations. Egalitarian representation of all stakeholders can be highly dependent on socio-political power dynamics. Fifth, these agreements can often be voluntary in nature as defined in their Code of Conduct. An example would be the moral right rather than obligation of Indian companies to undertake urban development and job creation in areas surrounding the leased farmlands (GOI Monitor Desk, 2011). Finally, these contracts place all parties on an equal platform, which given the vulnerabilities of economically poorer sections to greater socio-economic risk as well as fewer means of redressal, requires water tight law and governance. In short, there are no guarantees for the rural poor in these ventures.

To illustrate the above, one must ask two simple but related questions: What are the specific issues concerning the indigenous population and what has been the track record of Indian companies on these issues?

The foremost issue is that of rehabilitation of displaced farm labour. In Ethiopia, an estimated 20,000 workers will receive jobs as opposed to over 300,000 families that were displaced by 2011. Mechanization inevitably leads to lower labour-to-capital ratios. Many of the natural food crops have been replaced by plantation styled mono-culture crops grown for export. Companies like Karuturi have often been found wanting in providence of housing and proper working facilities for the employed farm labour, and needless to say promises of better education and health facilities have gone unheeded. Contractual agreements between farmers and companies can be heavily lopsided and built on a foundation of scant legal protection. It is interesting to see that many of these deals are brokered at a local governance level where the incentive for bureaucracy to cut lucrative deals at the expense of rural population is high. The track record, in short, is chequered and that after only a limited inquiry into relatively newer but more ambitious enterprises.

Role of African institutions and civil society

At an institutional level, the role of African governments and diplomatic ties in negotiating International Investment Agreements with foreign nationals has been rather bipolar. Provisions such as Rights of Establishment and Minimum Standard of Treatment have been routinely abused by offshore operators in African countries. Experiences in redressal mechanism vary extensively, with countries like Ethiopia appearing to be wilful partners in abetting land grabbing despite ample policy space to prosecute such illegal action while others like Cameroon using the legal process for greater accountability in agricultural investments (Rachel Thrasher, 2015). The civil society has often altered the narrative in these situations, at the very least bringing these gross injustices to the fore. Many Cameroonian activists were put in jail for protesting against Herakles' illegal activities, this activism did bear fruit. The civil movements in Ethiopia prompted the Environmental Protection Authority of Ethiopia to recommend cessation of Vedanta Plc's plan to clear ancient forest lands on White Nile for tea and spice plantations, even winning the President's support. However, in many decentralised governments with a weak centre like in Ethiopia, ultimate executive powers rest with the local government; often rendering these efforts futile. A recent empirical study shows considerable backroom dealing between local officials and executives of international corporations concerning land deals world over. (Bujko, Fischer, Krieger, & Meierrieks, 2015)

Conclusion

The incipient inklings of human life are said to have germinated in Africa. It is ironical then that it is the natives of Africa itself who happen to be at the bottom of the pyramid in the modern milieu of happenstance distribution of natural resources. The tendency of one man to be better off at the expense of others can perhaps be termed as an inevitable outcome of the Marxian process of surplus generation and hence dismissed as having been analysed adequately.

However, the world today faces a potentially colossal and multifaceted catastrophe – involving socio-economic disparity, chronic hunger, environmental upheaval and widespread social unrest. The greatest hamartia of economics lies in its inability to solve the world food crisis – a failure to solidify the most basic doctrine of resource allocation. As De Schutter's now famous aphorism goes, "… Hunger and malnutrition are not primarily the result of insufficient food production; they are the result of poverty and inequality…". That chronic world hunger, instead of being resolved, would be used as a legitimate carrier for further pathogenic exploitation of those already at the margins of society in Africa is a shameful example of the brutal human nature when dealing with the faceless, nameless masses that do not find space in our artificially limited psyche. The conventional method is to suggest better designing and implementation of law and governance, increased system of checks and balances on the perpetrators of mass injustice and providing a greater voice to those who are the traditional dwellers of the final frontiers of arable land that we wish to exploit in Africa. No matter how optimistic one may be about the prospects of human race, stories after stories of non-emotive exploitation of both nature and man makes one succumb to the cynicism of the inevitability of the fate that we have sealed for ourselves. To borrow from biology and philosophy, all that begins must cease to be. Certainly, the current convergence of various crises seems to be proceeding to an inevitable cessation.

However, there is also a possibility that human species has within it the ability to discover unexpected solutions right at the cusp of extinction and perhaps we are still waiting for those precious moments of precise decision making that prompts us to look beyond our noses and co-operate, if only temporarily, for extending our stay in the universe.

Until that happens however, we must do our best to spread knowledge of gross injustices across the world as much as we can. Putting pressure on the policy makers to reign in the malpractices of Indian companies on the shores of Africa – which has historically been our staunch ally – could be a step in the right direction.

Africa is, colloquially, the final frontier for rearing the ever-increasing world population. Perhaps the beginning and the perceived ending of human species will telescope into each other to provide the answers we are looking for.

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