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

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Introduction

• Ethiopia – one example of a country in which large-scale agricultural investments are growing

• Upward trends in land acquisitions, by both domestic and foreign investors, mainly in the lowland parts:
  - Gambella
  - Benishangul-Gumuz
  - Oromia
  - SNNPR regions

• In Ethiopia, the land investment has been primarily driven by the state.

• Widespread concerns regarding impact on local livelihoods and food security and the environment.
• In Ethiopia:
  o the state formally owns land - so determines who gets to use land for what purpose and
  o at the same time sympathetic to large investments in land

• Under such conditions, it is more likely that local communities lose out in the process

• This is even worse as customary land rights are not respected or clearly defined property rights and effective judicial systems to protect such rights are weak.
• The state and profit-seeking domestic economic and political elites as well as foreign investors have undertaken the land investments

• The state itself is directly engaged in the acquisition of big chunks of land, especially for state-run sugar plantations
• Contradictions and contestations between federal and regional state level authority over land and natural resources.

• Increasing levels of land transfers to investors directly by the federal government, despite the constitutional proclamation that granted regions the authority to administer land and other natural resources.

• Neither local communities nor respective regional authorities were involved in the land deals committed so far by the federal government.

• Inherent asymmetries in political power between the regional state and the federal government.
Conclusions

- Limitations to the role of local and regional state authorities over decisions regarding land because of the direct intervention by central state elites.

- The contestations over land and authority show the nature of political (and economic) power relations between the federal and the regional states.

- In the strategic case of land development, the federal government could not devolve practical authority to regional states, despite the constitutional provision to do so.

- This contest among and within state actors (regional and federal) adversely affects the land rights of local communities, who are least able to defend their rights against the current combined weight of the state and other elite actors.
• To what extent and in what ways would global and regional guidelines on the governance of tenure of natural resources shape the governance of large-scale land acquisitions on the ground in Ethiopia?

• How and what would be the role of civil society in land governance in a context of very narrow political space for engagement?
THANK YOU...