

FROM LAND GRABBING TO WATER GRABBING

INSA THEESFELD*

LEIBNIZ INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE.

In recent years, the trend of foreign actors securing land for agricultural production or to some extent also for environmental protection has increased substantially in speed and time, particularly in low income countries (Deininger et al. 2011, Zoomers 2010). Although, in principle, larger-scale farming can provide opportunities for poor countries, cases with negative impact on the local population or on the environment have attracted public attention and led to the negative notion of “land grabbing”. In this paper, I would like to raise the question: in how far land grabbing actually is water grabbing?

Rising food prices, bio-energy policies and population growth are seen as the drivers of the recent processes of land acquisition. Not only, ecological characteristics play a primary role, such as fertile soils, vegetation and humidity, but also, socio-political characteristics of a region and country, such as government support for investors, legal system dependency on the power of ruling elites, and an often implied suggestion that land which is not in agricultural use has no property rights and local claims attached to it.

I would like to contribute to the discussion that access to water in sufficient quantity and quality is crucial. Without water access, there is no possibility of irrigation which places a high risk on investors in case of drought periods. This paper investigates indications that land grabbing is motivated by the desire to capture water resources. In cases where water is not the driver for the rush for land, the changes in resource governance on land might still have an impact on the community resource governance of water, as most likely water is not freely available but reallocated from existing users.

The same way, we interpret today social-ecological systems, we have to focus on the link between land and water systems. Changes in property rights on land and formal and informal community water arrangements may or may not be related to one another. Due to the separate view on the resources land and water, formal contracts and agreements between the investors and the actors in the host countries do (if at all) regulate the property rights on land, but not on water, which also means that no compensation for a loss or a change in quantity and quality of the water is foreseen. The formulation of new agreements in the water sector is subordinated and left to the community actors.

The paper will be based on exemplary and rich case studies retrieved from literature. One of these cases is based on a small-scale irrigation scheme in Ethiopia, the hot-spots country of current foreign direct investment. Here, for instance, foreign horticultural farms started to use water from an irrigation canal that was formerly managed as a user-group common-pool resource by local smallholders.

The paper aims to elaborate on criteria for the connection between water grabbing and land grabbing. Similarities and differences of processes that relate both resource acquisitions are in the focus.

If the link between the land and the water sector is not officially recognized at higher administrative scales, this can lead to

- Disadvantages of already less powerful local actors. In contrast, farm managers and wealthy investors might be winners of the property reform, pushing for new institutional arrangements in the water sector that favours them.
- Deterioration of the natural resource, such as water level depletion and contamination.

Looking at the water and land sector at the same time during land deal negotiations is a big challenge due to the socio-ecological complexity of such upper-tier systems. Additionally, such negotiations often take place at highest political level not including stakeholders with local knowledge. I will concentrate on changes in community water governance described in various case studies that are a result of investors entering the arena. Knowledge about the determinants of such processes would help to design political intervention to strengthen for instance exactly the disadvantages of weaker actor groups in a bargaining process, if intended.