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# The 'bitter fruit' of a new agrarian model: Large-scale land deals and local livelihoods in Rwanda

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**The ‘bitter fruit’ of a new agrarian model:  
Large-scale land deals and local livelihoods in Rwanda**

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**Abstract:** In a context of globalisation and liberalisation, Africa is increasingly confronted with the commercialisation of its space. Various so-called large-scale actors - international private investors, ‘investor’ states, and local entrepreneurs - search for large quantities of land for production of food crops or bio fuels. This paper presents two Rwandan case studies, and analyses the impact of large-scale foreign and local elite-led land acquisitions upon local livelihoods. On this basis, the paper identifies broader agrarian and social changes taking place in Rwanda and Africa. In its conclusion, it gives some clues of how the table can be turned to make sure that local livelihoods are protected in the future shape of agriculture.

**1. Introduction: The place of small-scale peasants in large-scale land deals**

In October 2009, Rwandan press agents spread a euphoric message: the Rwandan government had closed a deal of 250 million USD in the presence of Tony Blair with two major private companies to produce bio diesel. Eco-Fuel Global, a US-based company responsible for the technical aspects, and Eco Positive, a UK-based company in charge of the mobilization of funds, will engage in the planting of 12 million of *Jatropha Curcas* trees. These trees will be planted on 10.000 hectares (1/250th of Rwanda’s surface) of ‘marginal land’ in the Eastern Province, ‘where food crops cannot survive’. After a waiting period of a couple of years (estimates range between 3 and 6 years), the plantations should produce 20 million litres of biodiesel per year, equal to 13% of the current Rwandan fuel consumption, and good for 6.500 jobs (Rwandan News Agency, 2009; Hitimana, 2009). This project fits neatly into the ‘sustainable Growth for Jobs and Exports flagship programme of the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper which aims for a ‘big push public investment programme’ that will ‘create strong incentives for the Private Sector to increase its investment rate in subsequent years’ (GoR, 2007:1).

Rwanda is not the only context where large-scale land acquisitions by major investment projects take place. Since the 2008 commodity boom, more than 40 million hectares have attracted the interest of investors within one year, of which more than 75% in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2010). And even before the commodity boom, the interest in Africa’s natural resources was already increasing. Van Braun and Meinzen-Dick (2009) give an extensive overview of deals from 2006 onwards in which foreign governments, actors operating in the private sector, and agricultural investment funds have secured access to thousands of hectares in developing countries. Important to mention is that investors are not necessarily interested in using this land for purely agricultural purposes. Zoomers (2010) and

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<sup>1</sup> The author is highly indebted to ideas developed by A. Zoomers and M. Merlet during the seminar ‘New issues in the struggle for access to land and the governance of land and natural resources in the context of globalization and agro-ecological crisis anno 2010’ at the Institute of Development Policy and Management on 30 April 2010 and to the multiple exchanges with the participants to the 2010 NVAS International ‘Africa for Sale’ Conference, organised by the Netherlands African Studies Association, 28-29 October 2010, Groningen.

Merlet & Jamart (2009) for example mention the increasing development of (eco)tourism in developing countries; the space needed for the exploitation of mineral, energy and forestry resources; space needed for protected areas and natural reserves, or for infrastructure projects and urban expansion. But most investors are attracted by the enormous potential of land to produce food crops (staple foods) and biofuels.

The phenomenon of large-scale land deals is not new<sup>2</sup>; however, the scale at which it is taking place right now is unprecedented (see Cotula et alii, 2009). A paradoxical combination of two discourses has developed around the recent trend: accounts of growing land scarcity and increasing land conflicts concur with a discourse that pleads in favour of attracting the necessary investors to develop the marginal, un(der)exploited, idle and degraded landholdings (Borras & Franco, 2010). Thorough analysis of the benefits and costs of such investment injections through large-scale acquisitions are still rare. Indeed, as noticed in the recent World Bank report on the topic: 'With little empirical data about the magnitude of this phenomenon, opinions about its implications are divided' (World Bank, 2010: ix).

The World Bank report analyses the risks in great length, but overall it seems to be rather optimistic about the potential of large-scale actors' involvement in sub-Saharan African agriculture to contribute to economic growth and poverty reduction. The report links most risks for failure to weak institutional capacity and a lack of transparency, and proposes several guidelines to realise improvements in both areas. It further acknowledges the potential of large-scale injections of funds in agriculture to improve access to technology, to capital markets, to infrastructures, and to institutions that allow increased productivity and effectiveness in the utilization of these assets (World Bank, 2010).

This discourse - acknowledging the potential of large-scale private investments in African agriculture - seems to contrast quite drastically with another World Bank discourse that highlights the importance of smallholder farming in the African context. Indeed, the 2008 World Development Report pleads in favour of a 'Green Revolution' for Sub-Saharan Africa that will have to be essentially different from the Asian Green Revolution, because of 'Africa's unique agriculture and institutions'. Given the large majority of the poor surviving from subsistence agriculture, the report emphasises the need to create 'a productivity revolution in smallholder farming'. The report analyses in depth the many challenges with which smallholders are confronted and analyses the institutional innovations that are necessary to improve their competitiveness (World Bank, 2007).

Is there an inherent contradiction in the World Bank's view on Africa's agricultural future? Not necessarily. In fact, critics of the 2008 World Development Report point out the fact that the report 'does not support smallholder farming per se, but commercially-oriented, entrepreneurial smallholder farming', which in reality will only be applicable to a minority of entrepreneurs (Akram-Lodhi, 2008). Indeed, the report states that 'not all smallholders will be able to farm their way out of poverty' (World Bank, 2007: 234); it is implicitly assumed that (only) those that are capable of

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<sup>2</sup> For an historic overview of land grabbing in the Kenyan context, see e.g. Klopp, 1999; for an historic overview of land grabbing in the Ethiopian context, see Puddu, 2010.

adapting themselves into small-scale rural entrepreneurs have a sustainable future in the agricultural sector<sup>3</sup>.

In short, the dominant view upon the ‘new agriculture’ for Sub-Saharan Africa focuses on the adoption of commercially-oriented production techniques through various paths: either through the involvement of large-scale investors, either through a transformation of (a particular group of) innovative smallholders into agricultural entrepreneurs, and preferably even a combination of both. This view is - besides the World Bank - shared by many agents in the development business.

What it fails to do, however, is to move beyond a conceptualisation of land as a pure market commodity that should be used to obtain maximal productivity. Indeed, the question that will challenge agricultural production systems in the near future is not (only) how to produce enough food to feed the world. The core issue is, first of all, how to ensure that different population groups have sufficient purchasing power to secure access to that food (dimension of equity and distribution); and secondly, how to make sure that the agency of more vulnerable population groups is enhanced through securing and enlarging the livelihood strategies available to them (dimension of agency and power relations).

Indeed, policy documents rarely make a thorough analysis of the diversity of subgroups existing within the rural population. Most analysis sticks to a differentiation between the ‘poor’ and the ‘non-poor’. However, Krishna (2009: 948) rightfully claims that “‘the poor’ does not constitute a valid category for analysis or action: it is no more than an article of speech’. Subgroups of poor have different identities, different material interests, different degrees of agency, and different interests with respect to land and natural resources (Vermeulen & Cotula, 2010). As a result, they have different needs in terms of policy design. Policy documents reflecting upon the opportunities and risks of large-scale land deals on the one hand, and institutional innovations that transform ‘smallholders’ (read: some groups of) into rural entrepreneurs rarely take this diversity of rural actors into account.

A thorough assessment of the ‘new agriculture’ should not stick to an estimation of the effects upon productivity, upon job creation, and – in the best case – upon overall income distribution. We need a much more detailed analysis of effects in terms of opportunities and threats to the socio-economic livelihoods, the agency, and the cultural identities of different local interests groups. Such analysis should furthermore consider the dimensions of time (short, medium and long-term) and space (local context, regional context, national context, supra-national context). On the basis of such analysis, policy makers could then take that diversity of interests into account and weight them off against each other, and against the overarching objective of poverty reduction. This brings us to a discussion at a much broader level, considering the way in which the new organisation of agricultural production will impact upon local livelihoods.

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<sup>3</sup> The World Bank further sees potential synergies between such small-scale agricultural entrepreneurs and the presence of large-scale private investors. The 2010 report on the potential and risks of large-scale land acquisitions mentions that “when done right, larger scale farming systems can also have a place as one of many tools to promote sustainable agricultural and rural development, and can directly support smallholder productivity” (World Bank, 2010: vi). The 2008 World Development Report frames how “the private sector drives the organisation of value chains that bring the market to smallholders and commercial farms” (World Bank, 2007: 8).

This paper concentrates on the Rwandan context to study two case studies, analysing the impact of large-scale foreign and local elite-led land grabs upon local livelihoods. On the basis of these cases, the paper identifies broader agrarian and social changes taking place in the Rwandan rural context. In its conclusion, the paper identifies how local, national and international arenas around land are interconnected, and pleads for the reinforcement of ‘glocal’ corridors that link pools of agency at the local level with pools of agency at the level of broader social movements.

## **2. Large-scale land acquisitions and local livelihoods in rural Rwanda**

All too often, land is conceptualised as a pure and exchangeable market commodity. But in reality, land relations are essentially social relations that are embedded within the wider political economy and are shaped by the relative bargaining power of various interest groups within society (Merlet, 2007). The divergent groups of rural actors in the African countryside see land as a social, cultural, and political space with great relevance to their economic livelihoods, but also their social identities. Large-scale actors with ambitions to acquire control over vast amounts of land (whether foreign actors or local elites) insert additional competition in an already tight space. Given their connections to the national (and sometimes international) political arena, they are in an advantaged position to defend their interests.

The two case studies in this paper both fit within the frame of large-scale land deals; however, at the same time they are very different. The first case aligns to the way in which large-scale land acquisitions are currently framed in the media: a foreign business group has acquired a concession over 3000 hectares of land. These types of ‘land grabs’ currently receive a lot of attention. However, land grabbing may also take place at a very local scale, only involving local elites. The second case study describes such a situation, where local elites have made use of national policy priorities to gain control over a vast area of land.

Both cases are situated in the Rwandan marshlands. Swampland since long has been an important natural resource for local peasant communities. All together it covers about 10 % of Rwandan territory. The Rwandan government has worked out a swampland ‘valorisation’ policy, inspired by the objectives to maximize agricultural output while using land more efficiently and more productively. However, the approach adopted for the swamplands is essentially different from that applied in the hills where authorities aim to register all land through individual property titles. Article 29 of the land law mentions that, “swampland belongs to the state. It shall not definitively be allocated to individuals and no person can use the reason that he or she has spent a long time with it to justify the definitive takeover of the land” (GoR, 2005). As no private property rights on swamp plots can be allocated to individuals, the government assumes the role of principal swampland developer. This approach may take two forms. In some locations, the government makes swampland available, in concession, to private investors. In others, the national government mandates local authorities to allocate marshland plots to farmer groups that use collective cultivation systems. In the second case describe below, local elite actors have used the policy discourse to capture control over access to marshland plots. Their role as ‘coordinator’ or ‘manager’ of the marshland has resulted in the de facto appropriation of control over land rights.

Furthermore, national policy makers impose a uniform technical solution (i.e. mono cropping) upon all local setting. They consider this method to be more productive than the traditional system which combines several food crops. They further foresee in specific regulations that enforce the cultivation of very particular crop types (e.g. market-oriented 'high-value' crops such as rice, sugar cane, maize, etc.). In a sense, the current cultivation practices used in the marshlands are a pilot experience with agrarian commercialisation policies that Rwandan authorities want to implement in the hills. And in fact, they are a pilot experience for ambitions of national and international development actors with the African agrarian space more widely: introducing commercially-oriented production techniques

Are the positive development outcomes of these large-scale land deals sufficient to justify their claim of contributing to pro-poor development? To assess this question, we have to consider the ways in which these projects impact upon overall productivity and food availability. Furthermore, we should assess the impact upon the livelihood strategies of the local population involved, and upon the chances for local empowerment.

## **2.1. Land acquisition by a foreign private actor**

In 1997, Kabuye Sugar Works (KSW) was the very first company to be privatised in post-conflict Rwanda. It was bought for 1.5 Million USD by the Madhivani Group which originates in India, but has been involved in business in Uganda for over 50 years. It is currently the largest private sector business group operating in Uganda, mainly involved in sugar production. At the moment of sale, the Madhivani business group was granted a land lease on approximately 3.150 hectares (of the 24.698 hectares of Nyabarongo swampland) for 50 years. A large part of this land had to be expropriated by the Rwandan authorities. By 2008, the Madhivani Group had invested about 13 million USD in KSW. It is active in many areas within a radius of 45 km from Kigali. The sugar cane factory employs 5000 to 6000 people as manual labour force. These labourers work on the approximately 3000 hectares that KSW holds in concession. However, quite a large part of this surface is vulnerable to floods; as a result only some 1750 hectares are cultivated. In addition, KSW processes the sugarcane of some 1200 - 1500 private farmers spread over a territory of 2200 hectares (information based upon interview with Mr Rao, general manager of Kabuye Sugar Works, in June 2007).

Overall, the Kabuye Sugar Works privatisation is regarded as a success story by the Rwandan government (see e.g. Privatisation Secretariat, 2001): "The land issue [referring to the 3000 ha of dispossessed land] isn't relevant anymore, the planters tell us – they understand now that the valley belongs to the State [who allocated it to the Madhivani Group], and that they can't claim anything. But it doesn't matter that much, as long as the people have work. And they do [...], they all have a job, be it in Kigali or in the plantations. There are even planters who come from neighbouring sectors". Our own field research however offers a different encounter with this so-called 'panoramic scenery'. In 2006 and 2007, we conducted in-depth qualitative field research in six rural imidugudu<sup>4</sup> in the Southern province<sup>5</sup>, each of them located

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<sup>4</sup> Rwandan households are typically scattered over the hills. The umudugudu (plural: imidugudu) is the administrative division that corresponds with one or a few hills. The boundaries of the umudugudu after the

nearby a swamp. We conducted interviews with various socio-economic categories identified at the local level in divergent focus groups. One of the 6 settings was located right next to the Nyabarongo valley, in which the Madhivani group is active as private investor. Our findings contrast with the positive image pictured by the Rwandan government.

Access to swampland plots in the Nyabarongo valley – as in many other places in Rwanda - was initially based upon the physical capacity to prepare a plot for cultivation. With time however, the exploitation density in the swampland increased<sup>6</sup>. Some had larger plots than others, and some peasants without land cultivated in a *métayage* system<sup>7</sup>. Some peasants focussed upon food crop production, others engaged in cash crops. Some plots were used for clay extraction for brick baking. Many of our informants described the Nyabarongo swampland as an important safety-net when harvests failed in the hills.

Important to mention is that swampland – also beyond the context of the Nyabarongo valley - has always had a special status in comparison to land in the hills. Whereas peasants' informal land rights on hill plots were generally quite well respected by public authorities<sup>8</sup>, the Habyarimana administration did lay claims on marshland plots. As a result of such claims from the formal side, land rights on swamp plots were arranged through a combination of both formal and informal claims that sometimes contradicted each other. In our case study area, there were for example some hundreds of hectares on which Kabuye Sugar Works (at that point a public company) had acquired user rights; but peasants continued to make use of these plots whenever Kabuye Sugar Works failed to cultivate them (f.e. after the war ended in 1994).

In 1997, the contradiction between formal and informal claims became however much more outspoken when the massive land claim made by Madhivani Business Group and supported by national authorities, strongly clashed with the locally perceived legitimacy of informal historically-embedded land rights. Virtually all local peasants in the wide neighbourhood of the research setting lost their user rights to swampland plots in the Nyabarongo valley. No compensation whatsoever was given for dispossessed land as – according to the official side – it was state property anyway<sup>9</sup>. Peasants themselves however perceived their user rights on swampland plots as

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administrative reform often concur with the boundaries of what was called the cellule before the administrative reform (2006), at least in the rural setting.

<sup>5</sup> Before the recent administrative reform (2006), Rwanda was divided into 11 provinces. Since the reform, the national territory is subdivided into 4 provinces. The previous provinces Gitarama and Gikongoro, where the research is undertaken, now fall largely within the boundaries of the Southern Province.

<sup>6</sup> At that point, other exclusion mechanisms started to play. Among those not active in the swampland were the newly established households, and households obliged to sell the user right on their marshland plot in times of setbacks, unable to recover the land afterwards. Poorer peasants cultivated land 'owned' by others in a *métayage* system.

<sup>7</sup> Farmers involved in the *métayage* system cultivate the land of another owner and as a compensation of obtaining user rights, they 'pay' the owner with a part of their harvest (maximum 1/3).

<sup>8</sup> This did however not exclude involvement of public authorities in cultivation methods. Pottier (1992) for example explained how agronomists and 'vulgarisateurs' promoted monocropping (and combinations of beans and maize or soya and maize) as the only good gardening method in 1986 (the year of agricultural intensification). He pointed out the disastrous results of this 'top-down' approach. Similarly, Newbury and Newbury (2000) critiqued such state-induced practices, which often favour technical insights on climatic conditions and land suitability over the local knowledge and abilities of the peasants themselves.

<sup>9</sup> Later, this principle was inserted into the land law, with article 29 mentioning that "swamp land belongs to the state. It shall not definitively be allocated to individuals and no person can use the reason that he or she has spent a long time with it to justify the definitive take over of the land" (GoR, 2005).

legitimate, despite the lack of formal or informal property titles. They were not (immediately) willing to give these up without contestation and showed open resistance<sup>10</sup>. Those who did not hand over 'their land' voluntarily were confronted with strong intimidation by the police and by local defence forces. Participants in our interviews referred to peasants being put in prison or 'chased' from the swampland 'by bullets'. Only a small group of peasants was able to maintain their user right on marshland plot(s): those who already produced sugarcane, and those with banana plantations at the borders of the swampland were able to keep their plots. Such cultivation was mostly practiced by better-off peasant categories who did not use the marshland plots to complement their subsistence production in the hills.

At the time of our research, a considerable part of the swampland near the umudugudu was not maintained and cultivated, and as a result it was covered with papyrus. Making this swampland suitable for cultivation would require irrigation and drainage techniques. At the time of our research, the discussion was ongoing whether this had to be done by the government or by Kabuye Sugar Works – and thus the Madhivani Group - itself. Informants referred to the fact that sugarcane 'does not work' there; and pointed to the fact that the peasants have 'techniques to prepare the marshland that Madhivani does not know of'; and that 'Madhivani only cultivates in the easy area, while we as peasants are used to work in difficult circumstances'.

Local peasants had hoped for local authorities at the district level to mediate between them and Madhivani to get access to the non-used part of the marshland. However, these attempts had failed. Someone mentioned that 'Madhivani is probably scared that we would occupy a larger part of the marshland if we get access to some flooded land there'. Another mentioned that 'we can not run to the local authorities anyway, because those have chased us from the spot in the first place'. Peasants perceived the role of local authorities as 'complying with national policy' without taking an interest in their local living conditions.

Interestingly, nearly none of our focus group participants worked as daily wage labourer for the company. There are several reasons for this. First, peasants generally 'do not have the time to work there for a whole day'. Even those with insufficient landholdings prefer to combine their temporary jobs with some cultivation activities on their own plots. Second, the wage rate is low. It is 400 Rwf (2007 prices) for a seven-hour day<sup>11</sup>. Despite high inflation, the wage rate had not increased since 6 years. An additional problem is that salaries are only paid 'at the end of the month' while people obliged to work for others are often confronted with an immediate cash constraint. In addition, no salaries are paid during sick leaves or when the swamps are flooded, which is frequent in the rainy season. Finally, the procedures to be employed by Kabuye Sugar Works were little transparent. Most respondents seemed ignorant on how getting access to such jobs.

Overall, the local peasant community seemed rather unanimous in their assessment of the privatisation of Kabuye Sugar Works as highly problematic to their own livelihoods. However, when assessing the overall gains versus losses from the

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<sup>10</sup> Musahara and Huggins (2005) for example mention how some farmers set fire to the sugarcane crop indicating how "discontent led to confrontation".

<sup>11</sup> When working on other people's plots as wage labourer, a physically strong man can earn up to 500 frw per day (work from the morning until 1PM). For women, and physically less capable men, the salary is 300 frw per day.

privatisation, we should focus on the larger picture. A major question is whether the outcome of the privatisation and the large-scale transfer of land from small-scale peasants to the business group have paid off. What were the results in terms of overall output productivity, employment creation, and what was the net effect local livelihoods (beyond an individual case study setting).

We use these criteria to compare three alternative allocations of swampland plots (see table 1): 1) the current situation; 2) the 3000 hectares of swampland held in concession by the Madhivani business group could instead be cultivated by individual small-scale peasants producing sugarcane; 3) the 3000 hectares of swampland held in concession by the Madhivani business group could instead be cultivated by individual small-scale peasants cultivating all sorts of crops.

**Table 1: Alternative allocations of 3000 hectares of swampland**

	<b>Held in concession by Kabuye Sugar Works</b>	<b>Peasant households cultivating sugarcane</b>	<b>Peasant households cultivating whatever they like</b>
<b>Productivity</b>	Productivity per available ha (3000 ha): 26,7 – 30,0 tons/ha Productivity per cultivated ha (1750 ha): 45,7 – 51,4 tons/ha	Productivity on 2200 hectares covered with sugarcane currently cultivated by peasant households: 50,0 – 54,5 tons/ha	Monetary value of ‘unconstrained’ crop production per ha is comparable to that of sugarcane production.
<b>Employment creation</b>	5000-6000 jobs for agricultural <i>labourers</i> , paid 400 Rwf per day	3000 ha (-20% less suitable land) could have provided: 5000-6000 independent sugarcane producing households with an average income of over 900 Rwf/day / more than 14.000 people instead of 5000-6000 with an average income of 400 Rwf/day	Swampland cultivation without sugarcane requirement results in similar earnings per hectare but would facilitate <i>access for poorer categories of peasants</i> .
<b>Local livelihoods</b>	Local peasant communities have lost access to 3000 ha of swampland -> implications for food security	If peasants cultivating sugarcane would be allowed to organise themselves through the set-up of a democratically functioning cooperative, this would enhance their bargaining capacity in price negotiations and reinforce the local capacity for collective action	Access to swampland and unconditional crop choice allows poorer categories of peasants (not capable of investing in sugarcane) to make use of marshland plots; makes peasants more resilient to climatic and market fluctuations (cfr. marshland as safety-net).

Source: based upon detailed calculations in Ansoms, 2009.

As indicated in table 1, the productivity of individual small-scale peasants growing sugarcane is not very different from the productivity of the land actually cultivated by KSW. Moreover, we may assume that individual peasants would most likely not have left fallow more than 1.000 hectares of swampland (only 1750 ha of the 3000 held by KSW are cultivated). Therefore, the overall sugarcane production could have been considerably higher if the land held in concession by KSW had remained in the hands of individual peasants. Next to productivity, there is the issue of employment creation. As mentioned, KSW provides a job to between 5000 and 6000 wage labourers, earning 400 Rwf per day. It is highly speculative to estimate how much earnings the 3000 hectares of swampland could have generated when allocated to independent small-scale peasant households instead of KSW. But basing ourselves on productivity rates and earnings of the 1200-1500 peasants currently producing sugarcane, and

assuming a linear relationship between land size and overall output in swampland plots<sup>12</sup>, the following statements can be made. The 3000 hectares of swampland could have provided an income comparable of the current wage daily wage rate paid by KSW (400 Rwf per day), for more than 14.000 independent peasant households. Or put differently, the 3000 hectares of swampland could have provided 5000 to 6000 independent peasant households with an income that doubles or triples the current income of the 5000 to 6000 daily wage labourers.

A second alternative would have been for individual small-scale peasants to continue cultivating all sorts of crops instead of only sugarcane. Ansoms (2009) shows that the productivity rate (monetary value per ha) of ‘unconstrained’ crop production is comparable to that of peasants engaged in sugarcane production. This is not necessarily an argument against sugarcane production. Regional crop specialisation could potentially be very profitable for local peasants if their bargaining capacity with the buyer could be improved. But as such, a diverse crop pattern (including sugarcane) does not impede the creation of cooperatives. And a very important advantage of unconstrained choice is that – while still allowing better-off peasants to combine subsistence and commercial farming – it enables poorer peasants without the means to invest in sugarcane production, to complement their production from their hill plots with food grown in the swamplands. As such, swamplands function as a n important risk-coping mechanism against famines. In addition, farmers can adapt their crop choice according to climatic conditions and market fluctuations. Flexibility thus allows for risk-diversifying cultivation patterns that play a very important role in ensuring food security.

Summing everything up, we can conclude that the large-scale land deal between the Rwandan government and Madhivani Business Group has been far from optimal in terms of securing local livelihoods. This is even recognised by the Privatisation Secretariat (2002: 6), stating that “the privatisation of Kabuye Sugar Office and its purchase by KSW in 1997 has been cited explicitly as an example of an operation which instead of benefiting to the population, has made people poorer in taking their fields”. Thousands of peasant families lost access to their swampland plots. For some who cultivated cash crops or used their land to extract clay for brick-baking, this meant a loss in their monetary income-generating capacity. Others, who concentrated on subsistence crops and used the swampland plots as a safety-net in times of setback, lost an important risk-coping mechanism. But interestingly, the allocation of 3000 hectares of land to the private investor is not even the most suitable option in terms of realising maximal output and productivity. In short, both the pro-poor as well as the macro-economic impact of the large-scale land deal are highly questionable.

## **2.2. Land acquisition by local elites**

In most cases, land grabs refer to ‘large-scale, cross-border land deals or transactions that are carried out by transnational corporations or initiated by foreign governments’ (Zoomers, 2010: 429). Zoomers presents other less traditional land-grabs (f.e. large-scale infrastructure works, urban extensions, etc.) through which land is transferred to

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<sup>12</sup> In reality, this relationship may not be linear. The inverse relationship between farm size and productivity, suggest that the trend may be exponential (with diminishing returns). On the inverse relationship, see Ansoms, 2008. On the other hand, poorer households may be constrained in their capacity to engage in sugarcane production without having access to risk-insurance and credit facilities.

‘long-distance actors’<sup>13</sup> – she refers to the foreignisation of space. However, interestingly, land grabs also occur at the local level with well-connected locally-embedded actors as protagonists. Such elite captures of space have always taken place, but elite networks now make use of the opportunities provided by the new discourse on agriculture as a motor for development to secure their control over space.

During our research in one of the six imidugudu mentioned above, we came across such a case of marshland being grabbed by locally-embedded elites. The location in question was situated in the centre of Rwanda (Southern Province) in a rather flat and fertile region. It was an important local centre for commerce. In ‘old times’ (before the 1990-1994 war), considerable parts of the marshland were left unexploited but a large part of the marshland was developed and cultivated by those who were ‘capable to work there’. Peasants were involved in a *métayage* system with the authorities who collected taxes at harvest time. The marshland was actually referred to as ‘Saudi Arabia’, pointing to the richness that the local population extracted from the marshland and the importance of this space for local livelihoods.

During the genocide, the marshland turned into a wilderness that was first used by genocide victims as a hiding space. Later, it was used in the same way by those hiding for the Rwandan Patriotic Front (which turned into the Rwandan Patriotic Party and until today occupies nearly all key positions in political and military life). In 1997, a military group of the RPF army arrived to develop the unexploited part of the marshland. The guiding discourse at the time was that this development would contribute to overall food production and most importantly, would clear away the hiding place for ‘evildoers’. Eugene (pseudonym), member of the military group, started a food-for-work project with the aid of WFP (World Food Program) to manage the process. The project employed local peasants to develop the marshland and prepare it for cultivation. At a certain point (our respondents were not clear on when exactly) WFP ended the funding. Eugene tried to continue the project for a while, but when around 1999, there was a flooding due to bad weather conditions, he decided ‘to leave the marshland to the people of the umudugudu’ (cfr. one of our respondents). After the flooding, the marshland was covered (again) with papyrus and had to be redeveloped. Local peasants returned and started cultivating land according to their physical capacity, or to their financial means to hire physical capacity.

Around 2002, however, a local entrepreneur, Alphonse (pseudonym) received the permission of the district authorities to start a project in the already occupied marshland. He managed to get the support of an NGO who provided him with maize seeds and manure. He imposed himself as the marshland manager, and obliged peasants cultivating on ‘his’ part to cultivate maize. Alphonse was described by the

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<sup>13</sup> These less-traditional land grabs do not necessarily transfer land to long-distance actors, but also allow local actors to appropriate space. Rwandan authorities for example plan to build a multi-storey shopping mall on the space where the main traditional market was located until its forceful closing down in 2004. Shop-keepers were displaced without receiving any compensation. The process of urban modernisation of Kigali often pushes more marginal groups to the outskirts, depriving them of their space in the urban centre (Michelon, 2009). Also in rural markets, private actors increasingly take control. My research in 2007 revealed that in several locations, Rwandan authorities had privatized the exploitation of local rural market infrastructures. Private investors had received the right to collect taxes, which immediately led to an inflation of taxation on small quantities of food. Peasants with only small surpluses preferred to not sell, or sold within the local setting for a below-market price. Local entrepreneurs were making money out of this, by accumulating the small surpluses of small-scale peasants and bring them to the market in larger quantities (with less burdensome taxes). Interestingly, the system was abandoned one year later, after intense protest by the local population.

local population as an *agricultural entrepreneur* ‘who is used to cultivate in the marshes, he does it everywhere’. Alphonse himself tried to reinforce his social statute as a broker by referring to his political connections at the highest level (whether real or virtual is unclear). He asserted that the maize produced on ‘his’ part of the marshland was destined for the ‘President’s grenier’ in Nyanza. It was clear, however, that he did have connections at the district level. According to our research participants, Alphonse took ‘everything he wanted’, both plots previously ‘owned’ by Eugene as well as plots that had always been cultivated by individual local peasants. When in 2003 Eugène returned, he found that ‘part of his space in the marshland was taken by Alphonse’ (cfr. one of our respondents). With the proof of old maps, he took the matter to the district where he reclaimed ‘his’ part of the marshland (approximately 120 hectares). Several research participants implicitly linked Eugene’s military connections to his negotiation ability to reclaim his part of the marshland. Eugene re-established his position as marshland manager on ‘his part’ of the marshland - this is the part of the marshland he had managed under de WFP.

Both ‘entrepreneurs’ adopted a different system of organising cultivation activities. Alphonse opted for letting people cultivate their previously occupied marshland plots, but with the obligation to cultivate maize. He provided the population with seeds, manure and fertilizers. But at the time of harvest, peasants were obliged to sell their maize production to Alphonse for a prize below the market prize. This system was very much criticized by nearly all our informants during our 2006 research as being exploitative. An anecdote often cited was one in which Alphonse had engaged local defence forces to catch peasants who tried to ‘smuggle’ maize out of the marshland and sell it ‘illegitimately’ on the market.

Alphonse later grouped people into ‘phantom’ associations once collective cultivation systems were promoted by the Rwandan government for marshland development. Despite the fact that people generally kept their user rights on their marshland plots, a significant percentage of local peasants (estimated at around 30%) lost access. This was either because they did not want to cultivate maize, either because they were not able to ‘cultivate in time’ (all peasants had to follow a fixed cultivation and harvest pattern), either it was the result of exclusion during the grouping of peasants in the associations.

In 2006, the odds turned against Alphonse as ‘he was chased from the marshland by the district authorities’ (cfr. one of our informants)<sup>14</sup>. After he left, people continued to cultivate ‘their’ plots that they had occupied before and during Alphonse’s presence but with the freedom to choose the crop type they wanted. Shortly thereafter however, in October 2006, the district authorities handed the management of the marshland over to a cooperative. Interestingly, the perception of local people upon the advantages and disadvantages of Alphonse’s system changed drastically over time, with a growing gap in perceptions in between different socio-economic groups. During our 2007 research, better-off peasants (able to secure access to a marshland plot in the new cooperative’s system – see below) generally presented Alphonse as

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<sup>14</sup> There were several versions of what happened exactly. According to some, he was involved in a dispute with the NGO who supported this project, and when the latter called upon the authorities to protest against Y’s behaviour, the authorities decided to chase him. Others referred to the disputes between Y and the local peasant population as a trigger for the authorities to chase him: ‘his perverse actions were noticed at the district and at the province level’. Some interviewees referred to ‘the contract between Y and the district that simply ended’. Still others mentioned that the authorities found out that the associations were fake, which brought them to chasing Y.

someone ‘who had exploited the population’ and focussed upon the many ‘injustices’ in the previous system. However, poorer categories of peasants in 2007 – in strong contrast to interviews recorded in 2004 and 2006 - referred to Alphonse as someone ‘who did well’, ‘a wise man that took care of them’. Someone quoted how Alphonse imported beans that he sold to the local peasants on credit in a period of food scarcity. Others referred to the possibility offered by Alphonse to obtain credits to cover school or health expenditures. Someone mentioned that ‘we really cried when Alphonse left, he was still someone who took care of poor people’, ‘today we are left with nothing’. Another focus group participant referred to Alphonse as ‘a saint’. Since he left their umudugudu, ‘many children had to leave school’.

This quite drastic shift in the appreciation of Alphonse’s marshland management system can be explained by studying the evolution of access to the marshland after Alphonse left. In 2007, with the transfer of the marshland’s management in the hands of a cooperative, the rules of the game determining access or exclusion to this part of the marshland altered quite drastically. The cooperative divided the marshland in plots of approximately equal size and fixed an entrance fee (first 3.000, then 5.000, then 6.500 frw). Whereas poorer peasants had been capable of securing their access rights, the financial requirements imposed by the cooperative now led to the de facto expulsion of a large part of the poorer population from the marshland. Several participants used strong language to describe their exclusion from the marshland: ‘if they do not let us exploit the marshland, we are dead’; ‘we will die if the current situation continues’.

Eugene adopted a very different system to organise cultivation activities in ‘his part’ of the marshland right from the moment he returned and ‘reimposed’ himself as the manager. He set up a cooperative and ‘motivated’ the population to work in associations under the umbrella of this structure of which he became the ‘coordinateur’ or ‘spokesperson’. Each association had to concentrate on a particular crop type, in line with the official monocropping policy<sup>15</sup>. During our research stay in 2007, focus group participants estimated the number of marshland associations under this umbrella cooperative at around 60, with members from all the nearby imidugudu.

Access to or exclusion from the associations under the cooperative’s umbrella was first of all dependent upon financial means. Each association had to contribute 100.000 Rwandan francs to the cooperative<sup>16</sup>. Another requirement in securing access to marshland plots, was to have the ‘necessary physical force to cultivate’. Those who fell sick at a certain point of time and were unable to pay for labour force working in their place were obliged to leave. Next to money and physical force, access to

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<sup>15</sup> One of the objectives of the Rwandan government is to stimulate the adoption of the monocropping technique, where peasants cultivate one particular crop type per plot. In addition, each region should specialise in some particular crops based on agro-bio-climatic conditions and in accordance with market needs. Article 63 of the land law specifies that productive land use “shall be based on the area’s master plan and the general structure on land allocation, organization and use and [the adoption of] specific plants certified by relevant authorities” (GoR, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> This amount is due, regardless of the land allocated to it and regardless of the number of members. The way this amount is gathered may differ among associations (one time payments, harvest time payments, monthly payments – not all had paid this amount at the time of our research. What exactly the destination of this money was, was unclear to most focus group participants. Some mentioned that part of the money will remain at the individual association’s disposal; others mentioned that it serves to pay the needs of the cooperative (referring to operating costs); still others claimed that it goes into the pockets of the associational presidents and the cooperative coordinators while the local peasants have no clue what purpose it serves. The financial requirement was described by a participant as ‘a delicate problem as many people do not find the necessary means’.

marshland plots in Eugene's part was also determined by the social connections and the resulting access to information peasants disposed off. Some farmers were better informed about the inevitable evolution from individual towards collective marshland user rights (focus group participants in this case referred to themselves as 'those who knew the utility of the marshland'). They formed associations with a limited number of members early in the collectivisation process and received user rights on considerable plots of marshland. By the time most others started to understand the inevitability of attending an association to maintain access to marshland plots, most space was occupied. Associations created later onwards counted more members and received user rights on smaller plots of marshland. The 'early' associations did not want to enrol more members as they wanted to 'preserve the size of their plots'.

On top of this, polarisation in terms of marshland access was accelerated by the fact that certain influential peasants (referred to as 'capitas') - well-connected to local authorities and to Evariste's cooperative - 'bought' user rights to considerable parts of the marshland to then 'gather an association around them'. Local peasants were obliged to pay high financial contributions, around 5.000 up to 6.500 frw to adhere, in addition to annual tax rates. Several participants mentioned that the way people adhere to associations in 'Eugene's marshland' these days is 'a secret'. Someone openly accused the association authorities of receiving 'pour-boire's', (drinking money used as a bribe). In any case, it is clear that the way associations have been composed and the way in which the marshland was distributed, have consolidated and even reinforced existing power imbalances.

Overall, we could summarise the situation as follows. Whereas poorer peasants did have the opportunity to occupy marshland plots in periods of 'disorganisation', the rearrangement of the institutional landscape with the introduction of new formal policy guidelines did not turn into their favour. In an initial stage, the influential entrepreneurs functioned as gate keepers at the interface between the local setting and the external world. They extracted power from their negotiation capacity with external donors and their socio-political relations with authorities at local and higher levels. But in the process they reinforced their position by acquiring increasing control over the use and distribution of marshland plots.

The 'associational requirement' in combination with agrarian commercialisation policies - as promoted by the Rwandan authorities - then further enhanced existing categorical distinctions (even though Alphonse was replaced by the coordinator of the new marshland cooperative). Better-off peasants were able 'to buy their way in the marshland'. Some peasants with sufficient financial means and the necessary social networks even managed to become intermediary brokers between Alphonse and Eugene on the one hand, and the associational members on the other hand. For poorer peasant categories however, the marshland became yet another political arena in which they ended up at the losing end of the bargaining process (cfr. definition of poverty as an institutional process in Bastiaensen et alii, 2005). As such, the introduction of new institutional arrangements and the resulting reinforcement of existing power imbalances only added to the durable inequality among peasants. Elite capture of the opportunities provided by the reforms resulted in the reproduction and reinforcement of structural forms of poverty and existing patronage networks.

### **3. Conclusion: How to turn the table in order to protect local livelihoods?**

What we see in both case studies, is a process of *rural differentiation*, defined by White (1989) as “a dynamic process involving the emergence or sharpening of ‘differences’ within the rural population; [...] it involves a cumulative and permanent process of change in the ways in which different groups in rural society – and some outside it – gain access to the products of their own or others’ labor, based on their differential control over production resources” (White, 1989: 19-20). The *process* of rural differentiation itself takes the form of a polarisation, of deeply rooted social change through shifts in control over resources (cfr. land and capital), shifts in the division of labour, and in the division of decision power of various socio-economic categories. Such polarization has always occurred, since the insertion of development countries’ economies into the capitalist system. However, in an increasingly globalising and liberalising context, the scale and speed of polarisation is unrecorded. The window of opportunity this context provides to large-scale actors – both foreign and domestic – to secure access to African land is unprecedented.

The resulting polarization takes the form of deeply rooted social change through the shifts in control over resources (cfr. capital), the shifts in the division of labour, and in the division of decision power of various socio-economic categories. De facto, it results in a ‘deagrarianisation’ of the Rwandan and African countryside, defined by Bryceson (2002: 726) as “the long-term process of occupational adjustment, income earning reorientation, social identification and spatial relocation of rural dwellers away from strictly agricultural-based modes of livelihood”. This ‘long-term’ process is now gaining speed.

Merlet & Jamart (2009) warn that the impact of such trend – once fully set into motion - will be irreversible. The new agriculture based on commercially-oriented entrepreneurship will lead to the destruction of diversity in terms of agricultural production systems, ecosystems, knowledge, cultures etc. It will lead to the gradual winnowing out of family farming, even when located far from the directly implicated investment areas. Small-scale farmers will increasingly face difficulties to deal with market and price fluctuations. They will have increasing problems to secure their land rights on an increasingly competitive land market. It is therefore important to assess the opportunities and risks implied by the new ways of organising agriculture before engaging in blind experimentation.

In the case of Rwanda, for example, the macro-economic picture looks rather bright, with a projected agrarian growth of 6% in 2010 and 2011, in line with the average over the past five years (IMF, 2010). On the ground, however, we see that those peasants who are not able to secure their land rights on an increasingly competitive land market, become part of a rural ‘proletariat’. This proletariat mainly works as simple agricultural wage labour in temporary, poorly paid jobs; and is involved in a daily struggle for survival. The off-farm sector (both rural and urban) is not capable to create sufficient alternative employment opportunities to absorb this growing mass of untrained wage labourers. As a consequence, the increasing competition for and commoditization of land – in combination with the resulting deagrarianisation – has a strongly negative impact upon the livelihoods of a large majority of the rural population (Ansoms, 2010).

How can we turn the table in order to protect local livelihoods in an African context of increasing commercialisation and commoditization of land? The 2010 World Bank document brings forward several policy recommendations. Most focus on the combination of enhancing good land management from the side of the government and promoting responsible corporate behaviour from the side of the investors<sup>17</sup>. Both set of recommendations can however be framed as a way to narrow the terms of debate.

First of all, the elaborate focus on the promotion of principles for responsible corporate behaviour is not only problematic because of its voluntary nature (Borras & Franco, 2010). Even more worrisome is its implicit acceptance of the fact that an evolution towards large-scale agricultural production systems is unavoidable (White, 2010). Indeed, despite its discourse in favour of small-scale farming, also the 2008 World Development report states how ‘economies of scale in the “new agriculture” often are the key for obtaining inputs, technology, and information and in getting products to the market. As agriculture becomes more technology driven and access to consumers is mediated by agroprocessors and supermarkets, economies of scale will pose major challenges for the future competitiveness of smallholders’ (World Bank, 2007: 91–92).

Akram-Lodhi (2008: 471) denounces the way in which smallholder agriculture is now declared unviable, after ‘having systematically undermined smallholders by disinvesting and exposing them to “free” market forces on an uneven playing field’. He criticises the almost implicit acceptance of the World Development Report that smallholders’ dispossession of farmland will continue and even gain speed. Likewise, Veltmeyer accuses the lead authors of the report (2009: 395) of ‘view[ing] the peasantry by and large as an anachronism, seeking to defend a way of life and an economy that is inherently non-viable’. Borras and Franco (2010: 515) frame how the focus on Codes of Conduct for large-scale investors fits within that same view as it ‘a priori dismisses the possibility of other development pathway options [next to those associated with mega land deals] and ignores the clamor of those who believe that other pathways are possible’. Those alternative pathways - departing from an a-priori supposition of a corporate-led transnational capitalistic development model - are according to Borras and Franco based upon a categorical protection of the land rights of poor people.

Another set of policy guidelines in the 2010 World Bank report focuses upon the responsibility of the government. The document proposes several guidelines to improve the policy, legal and institutional framework for land management (World Bank, 2010). It does however not call into question the traditional one-size-fits-all approach to land management (see e.g. World Bank, 2006; or de Janvry et alii, 2001) based upon private, formally registered property titles.

The market-led agrarian reforms (MLAR) that have been implemented in many developing countries imply the introduction of a system of private exclusive property rights that are freely transacted on ‘willing-buyers, willing-sellers formal land market’ (Bryant, 1996: 1543). The MLAR model foresees in only minimal involvement of the state and is against the imposition of any maximal ceilings on land holdings.

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<sup>17</sup> Also other international agencies such as IFPRI and FAO are active in promoting the establishment of Codes of Conduct in large-scale land deals.

Altogether, this should result in a self-selection process of the most productive producers; accordingly, productivity and agricultural efficiency should increase (for the main arguments of the MLAR literature, see Deininger & Feder, 1998 and Deininger, 2003).

In line with the MLAR model, securing land rights has been regarded as a legal issue that has to be regulated by statutory law allocating official land titles, guaranteed and managed by central authorities. Formally recognised private property titles are seen as a prerequisite to enhance rural agents' incentives for investment and to settle land conflicts that have emerged in a context of institutional confusion (Deininger and Feder, 2009). In reality, however, 'gaining "title" to land has never been a "simple" recognition of unused capital but has always involved severe social struggles with distinct winners and losers' (Peters, 2009: 1322). These struggles take place in whichever system of land tenure arrangements, both communal and individual, both formal and informal. Therefore, the introduction of a system of centralised title registration should not be perceived as a technical solution, but is connected to social, economic, cultural and political arena in which various actors have different power resources (see also Borras & Franco, 2010).

The fact that many small-scale peasants have never registered their titles – and in the case of the Rwandan marshes not even allowed to express any land claims despite the (often intensively) use of the land – has facilitated the development of a discourse of 'vast areas of non-used land' waiting for development through a capital injection by private investors, or an engagement by local elites. In the new context of increasing competition and commoditization (cfr. Zoomers, 2010) of space, the already ongoing formalisation of land rights - combined with the lack of recognised customary land titles – is opening up an interesting window of opportunities for more powerful actors to negotiate over land rights with the relevant authorities to exploit the productive potential of 'un(der)utilised' land.

Furthermore, the relevant authorities have a very particular own agenda in negotiations over land rights. Personal connections between policy makers on the one hand, and interested large-scale actors or local elites on the other may definitely play a role. Vermeulen & Cotula (2010: 914) point out that 'when tested within real negotiations, government agencies invariably align with the investor rather than the local land users'. This political economy dimension is however totally unacknowledged in the World Bank reports. Indeed, as pointed out by Scoones (2010), 'The World Bank's hyped report on land grabbing is confusing and disappointing, because its analysis lacks an understanding of what drives investments, what politics surround land deals, and the socio-political dynamics shaping livelihood outcomes'.

Whereas the 2010 World Bank report (2010: 93) focuses on good land management and corporate responsibility to increase the chances for 'host countries [...] to use investor interest to help them utilize the resources at their disposal in a way that can [...] improve local livelihoods'; Borras and Franco (2010) plead in favour of a human rights-based approach that takes the right to food and the right to land as a starting point. Such approach completely calls into question the current agro-industrial food industry; instead it pleads in favour of a completely different agrarian model based upon the productive potential of small-scale farmers. Borras (2008) links this with the

idea of ‘food sovereignty’, a right proclaimed by the Vía Campesina that is based upon the recognition of the potential and capacity of family-based farming.

The current trends in agrarian change take place in a context with layered realities and actors operating at different levels. Therefore, an efficient counterweight can only be organised if actors at these different levels participate. Indeed, ‘the challenge is not to look for alliances of undifferentiated entities [...], but to forge alliances between reformist initiatives from above [through state and inter-governmental institutions] along with widespread, consistent mass mobilizations by affected rural poor and movements and allies among civil society from below’ (Borras and Franco, 2010: 523).

Such mass mobilization is not straightforward in an African context where democratic values and freedom of expression are often lacking. Local-level initiatives often lack leverage to provide a counterweight to public-corporate partnerships that have already concluded their land deal. Moreover, national authorities may try to capture local-level initiatives to neutralise their power to resist. In the Rwandan context, for example, the government pushes small-scale peasant associations in ‘coordinating structures’ (cfr. cooperatives) that are managed or controlled by public authorities. This severely limits their capacity to provide a counterweight to decisions taken by that very same government. Rwanda - and Africa at large - therefore need transnational agricultural movements that make the bridge between north and south, but also enhance partnerships within the south. The ultimate goal would be to evolve towards a Pan-African wave of connected social movements defending the rights of small-scale peasants. However, to achieve this, small-scale peasants have to first organise themselves locally, and nationally. Development agents could play a role by providing supporting what Borras & Franco call ‘a multi-level sandwich strategy’. We would rather frame it as forging the corridors that link pools of agency at the local level with pools of agency at the (inter)national level. Such corridors are crucial for African small-scale peasants to collectively raise their voices and provide a counterweight to the way in which the ‘new agriculture’ is winnowing them out.

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