Optimism and populism of large scale land acquisitions: A case study of Nansanga farm block in Zambia

By Andrew Chilombo, PhD Candidate
The University of Edinburgh, School of GeoSciences, UK
Supervisors: Dr. Dan van der Horst and Dr. Casey Ryan

Contact details: A.chilombo@sms.ed.ac.uk
chilombos@yahoo.co.uk
+44 742 692 7966

Introduction
The contemporary phenomenon of large scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) for food security, financial investments, carbon markets and biofuel production, has spurred polarised debates among development practitioners, policy makers, civil society organisations, business communities and local communities. The debates are bifurcated into techno-economic optimism on the one hand, and naïvely grounded and unsubstantiated populism, on the other. A comprehensive understanding of the scope of this phenomenon at international, regional, national and community levels has been elusive to social science research. This is due to methodological and epistemological challenges linked to the inexistence and evolving nature of LSLAs. To reduce anecdotal claims that take potential socio-economic and ecological implications for actual impacts, getting facts right on LSLAs remains a scholarly imperative. Knowledge building with appropriate theoretical and conceptual underpinnings at community level where LSLAs actually happen, offers potential to challenge the mainstream socio-economic and ecological optimism and populism that characterise LSLA debates. Taking Nansanga farm block, a government of Zambia-led agricultural program to accelerate rural development, this research project seeks to understand implications of LSLAs at community level to contribute to the socio-economic and ecological debates of the phenomenon.

Systematizing the understanding of Socio-economic and Ecological (SEE) Implications of LSLAs

Levels of LSLA and relative data availability

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<th>Global/International level</th>
<th>Continental/Regional level</th>
<th>National level</th>
<th>Community level</th>
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<tr>
<td>Global level factors and SEE level implications</td>
<td>Continental/Regional factors and SEE level implications</td>
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Research objectives:
1. To understand the implications on rural livelihoods and social differentiation of the farm block program as a vehicle of rural development.
2. To understand how the farm block program as a model of rural development has (re)shaped the asset portfolio of rural communities in Nansanga farm block; and
3. To explore the political, socio-economic and ecological dynamic contexts that determine winners and losers in customary land deals in Zambia.

Methodological approach
Co-production of data and knowledge with communities using Participatory Rural Appraisal methods:
1. Focus group discussions and Key Informant Interviews
2. Participatory resource mapping, transect walks
3. Participatory wealth ranking
4. Seasonal calendars
5. GIS resource map analysis
6. Analysis of secondary sources and Key Informant Interviews outside the farm block (government, Agri-business entities, researchers, development practitioners, civil society organisations)

PRELIMINARY conclusion
While cash flow and physical capital have increased in Nansanga farm block area, preliminary results reveal joblessness; land-developers’ insolvency and land idleness; land speculation, lack of land use planning; erosion of social capital; amplified sense of tenure insecurity among community members; corruption; and immigration. Community access and user rights to land and associated resources have been undermined. Socio-economic and ecological implications of LSLA on rural communities are diverse and context-specific.