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Optimism and Populism of Land Acquisitions: A Case Study of Nansanga Farm Block in Zambia

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Abstract

The contemporary phenomenon of large scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) for food security, financial investments, biofuel production and carbon markets, have 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 naively grounded and unsubstantiated populism, on the other. Literature on LSLA is more grounded at global, continental/regional and national levels. These levels of investigation have focussed on land global markets, global financial uncertainties, biofuels and the spike in food prices of 2007/2008. The investigations take a geopolitical lens that categorises the global north as ‘resource poor, financial haves’ and the global south as ‘resource rich, financial have-nots.’ They have also focused on national policies, corruption and government complicity. The analyses at these levels share a common caveat: reliability of data. The actual socio-economic and ecological implications at community level are not fully understood. This is owing to the incipience of the phenomenon, and epistemological and methodological challenges. In 2002 the Zambian government approved the establishment of farm blocks across the country to commercialise agricultural land to attain economic diversification, enhance food security, open up undeveloped rural areas, reduce poverty and minimise rural to urban migration. In the LSLAs debate, where does the Zambian farm block programme as model of rural development fit? Taking Nansanga farm block in central Zambia as case study, this research seeks to challenge the mainstream socio-economic and ecological optimists and populists in the LSLA debates. The research uses participatory rural appraisal methods. Preliminary results indicate that socio-economic and ecological implications of LSLA are diverse and context-specific. They indicate that there have been improvements in physical capital and cash flow into Nansanga area on the one hand, and on the other, land loss, poor wages and land use change.

Keywords: Large scale land acquisitions, livelihoods, Nansanga farm block, Zambia