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Understanding the relationship between large-scale land acquisitions and land inequality: A systematic review

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in farmland in numerous regions worldwide reflected in large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs). However, despite a large body of case-specific evidence investigating the impacts of LSLAs on local communities and extensive documentation of LSLA processes, research rarely engages explicitly with the question of land inequality and current literature lacks a systematic and comparative synthesis of how LSLAs shape land inequality across contexts. Our systematic literature review examines the nexus between LSLAs and land inequality, with a regional focus on Africa. Africa is the global focal point for international land investors, while at the same time, the continent exhibits a high level of land inequality. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, we searched three databases (Scopus, Web of Science, AgEconSearch) for peer-reviewed journal articles in English that were published between 2000 and 2024. From an initial set of 1,422 papers, we removed duplicates and screened titles, abstracts and full texts for relevance, resulting in 142 papers coded using a systematic coding scheme. In our analysis, we identified two major strands of the literature: One strand that primarily focus on governance mechanisms and institutional processes that enables the implementation of LSLAs, restructure land access, reallocate control over productive resources, and reinforce existing power asymmetries. And a second strand that concentrates on case-specific socio-economic outcomes for local communities. Studies measuring shifts in farm size, landholdings, or access to commons reveal that investments often reinforce or exacerbate pre-existing inequalities. This review offers researchers and policymakers a critical synthesis of what is known, contested, and unresolved regarding the distributional outcomes of LSLAs, thereby making an important contribution to the debate on their regulation.

Keywords: Land Acquisitions, Land concentration, Land deal, Land Governance, Land Inequality, large-Scale Agricultural Investment

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