

Land Grabbing and the Axis of Political Conflicts: Insights from Southwest Cameroon

Frankline A. Ndi and Simon Batterbury

Abstract: Large-scale land acquisition (LSLA) by foreign interests is a major driver of agrarian change in the productive regions of Africa. Rural communities across Southwest Cameroon are experiencing a range of political conflicts resulting from LSLA, in which commercial interests are threatening local land-use practices and access to land. This paper shows that the struggle to maintain or redefine livelihoods generates tension between inward competition for and outward contestation of claims to land. In Nguti Subdivision, the scene of protests against a particular agribusiness company, there is continued debate over ideas about, interests in, and perceptions of land and tenure. The authors show how top-down land acquisition marginalises land users, leading to conflicts within communities and with the companies involved, and conclude that for an agro-project to succeed and avoid major conflicts, dominance by elite interests must give way to a more inclusive process.

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Frankline A. Ndi is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. He holds an International MSc in Rural Development (Belgium), an MSc in Peace and Development Studies (Sweden), and a BSc in Sociology and Anthropology (Cameroon). His research interests include food security; agricultural development; rural livelihoods; conservation and development projects; and environmental policies, politics, and conflicts.
E-mail: <ndihills@yahoo.com>

Simon Batterbury is professor of Political Ecology at the Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, and principal fellow, School of Geography, University of Melbourne. His research includes the political ecology of rural development in Burkina Faso and Niger, studies of land tenure in Timor-Leste, and mining and indigenous politics in New Caledonia.
E-mail: <simonpjb@unimelb.edu.au>

Africa is increasingly attractive for investment, and particularly from the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, there has been renewed interest in commercialising agricultural land and forests (Vermeulen and Cotula 2010). Wealthy African companies and multinational investors with roots in the West, China, and the Middle East have stepped up their efforts to acquire land for food and biofuel production, mining, timber extraction, and even for conservation purposes (Borras and Franco 2013; Borras et al. 2011; Scoones et al. 2013; Vermeulen and Cotula 2010; Wolford et al. 2013; Zoomers 2010). The acquisition of vast tracts of land was also presented as a reaction to a convergence of crises centring on food security, rising market shares for biofuel, climate change, and finance capital (Borras and Franco 2010). Initially, large-scale land acquisitions (LSLA) were initiated by powerful foreign actors and multinational corporations (Oya 2013; Scoones et al. 2013). It is now clear that national governments and local elites are equally actively involved, as facilitators and beneficiaries (Alden Wily 2011, 2012; Baglioni and Gibbon 2013; Borras and Franco 2010; Cotula 2013; Kandel 2015; Millar 2015; Vermeulen and Cotula 2010).

Studies suggest that land investors favour countries with weak governance systems and suitable physical conditions (Cotula et al. 2014; Verma 2014), particularly the post-conflict economies (Millar 2015). If Africa is “rising” it is doing so unevenly, and unjustly. Some projects have been cancelled or scaled back in the last three years due to a return to a less favourable economic climate, but protests against non-consultative “land grabs”¹ are still newsworthy (Cotula 2013). The control of productive resources appears more complex and nuanced.

This article provides some local evidence for the claim that land acquisition threatens local livelihoods and cultural norms. The researchers focus on the Herakles Farms (Sithe Global Sustainable Oils Cameroon, SGSOC) agro-plantation project in Southwest Cameroon to show how local livelihoods are threatened and contested. Working with communities in Nguti Subdivision, the authors examined the concerns that have accompanied LSLA in the region and the proliferation of land-use conflicts (Fonjong et al. 2015). They show how an axis of political conflict, with socio-economic and cultural implications, has emerged from top-down LSLA in the region and frequently ignores the voices and interests of land users.

1 The phrase “land grab” has become a catch-all to describe and analyse the current explosion of large-scale (trans)national commercial transactions of land (Borras et al. 2011).

Although similar land acquisitions have been widely studied (an example being Kampong Sugar in Cambodia, IDI 2014; see also Hall et al. 2015), those in Cameroon have largely escaped attention. This study asks specifically why the people of Manyemen, Ebanga, and Talangaye contest SGSOC's agro-plantation project and how local communities' quests for additional farmland generate conflict within communities and with the agro-company. What effects do new claims to land have on local communities' socio-economic and cultural well-being? What does this tell us about new forms of land access and control in contemporary Africa and what Ribot and Peluso (2003: 153) call "the *ability* to derive benefits from things," which may include different and more equitable access arrangements?

This study uses LSLA interchangeably with "land grabbing" in recognition of the fact that the debates on the terminology are ongoing and contested (see also Doss et al. 2014). Land grabbing is a more accurate term in our case because of the shady nature of the land deals, and SGSOC's inability to respect certain criteria for responsible land investment and good governance, for example, a lack of proper social and environmental impact assessment (see also Ndi 2017).

Context

Many large land deals in Africa involve a shift to commercial monocultures. Many African governments see foreign land investments as a way to enhance agricultural productivity by bringing technological innovation and new infrastructure – in principle creating jobs, public revenue, and economic development (Cotula et al. 2014; De Schutter 2009; Lisk 2013; Neville and Dauvergne 2012; see also Gebresenbet 2016). But there is an asymmetrical power relationship in land deals negotiated without the consent of (potentially) affected populations (Fairbairn 2013; GRAIN 2008). In most cases, the assumption that gains will "trickle down" to local people, through employment on plantations, outgrower schemes, or land-access royalties, is illusory (Anseeuw 2013; O'Brien 2011). It is almost certain that the greatest impacts are felt by the poorest: forest-dependent households, pastoralists, and farmers who are dispossessed from semi-subsistence livelihoods and are bypassed by other options (De Schutter 2012; Vermeulen and Cotula 2010).

Research has cautioned that the large-scale acquisition of land, if not properly managed and implemented, can threaten the social and economic livelihoods of rural agrarian populations and the legal recognition of customary land-use systems (Zoomers 2010). The former United Nations rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, contended

some years ago that LSLA would lead to exclusion, displacement, and social fragmentation (De Schutter 2009). Local communities have certainly experienced these phenomena (Borras and Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015; Mamonova 2012; Smalley and Corbera 2012).

On a global scale, Scoones et al. (2013) have argued that little has been done to understand what actually transpires in LSLAs on the ground, and few reports offer insight into the overall impacts, whether positive or negative. Oya (2013) describes most studies as empirically hasty and methodologically prone to shortcuts, urging researchers to undertake in-depth qualitative assessments of the socio-economic impacts. Edelman (2013: 490) advocates more “ethnographic or historical analyses” in an attempt to discover the “on-the-ground realities” of large land deals (see also Millar 2015). Borras and Franco (2013) suggest that understanding local people’s political reactions to large land deals requires locating the dynamics in broader agrarian transformation processes and analysing the main axis of political conflict. “Conflict” refers to contrasting interests, ideas, and perceptions associated with large land acquisition that results in contestations and confrontations within communities, and between these communities and the state and/or the investors. This paper focuses on the drivers and socio-economic and cultural implications of this conflict.

In accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, all “untitled” land has been controlled and managed by the state since the 1970s (Feintrenie et al. 2014; Fonjong et al. 2010). More recently, substantial land allocations have been sanctioned by the political regime, leading to the displacement of agricultural and forest communities occupying ancestral lands, usually narrowing their options to relocation, waged labour, or migration to cities and towns (see Schwartz et al. 2012; Greenpeace 2014). Keeping in mind this context, this research first outlines theories of land access and how capacities to benefit from land and forest resources become constrained and, second, how communities respond to dispossession. The section thereafter provides a brief description of the case, the project, and the methods of data collection. Then, the connection between land politics, agribusiness development, and land conflicts specific to Cameroon is examined. Following that, the authors use a cluster of three villages to analyse the axis of political conflicts in Nguti Subdivision, and their sociocultural implications. This is followed by a brief discussion and then conclusions. Because land grabbing has been found to generate unpredictable responses, the theoretical contributions of this research are cautious and tied strongly to the case under investigation.

Theories of Land Access and the Nature of Resistance to Dispossession

Access to land can be denied or controlled, and this echoes through into “access to livelihoods,” which is the prime concern of local people affected by land grabbing (Ribot and Peluso 2003). LSLAs in the tropical regions of Cameroon also qualify as examples of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003). Harvey argues that the expropriation of the means of production accompanies capitalist modes of production. His extension of “primitive accumulation”² includes the displacement of peasant farmers in favour of large-scale producers; land acquisition’s progressive substitution of subsistence mixed cropping for commercial cash crops; and the effective privatisation of commonly held and maintained land and natural resources. The commercial appropriation of land in Cameroon’s tropical regions has been assisted by the state and by significant political and socio-economic inequalities.

Where access to land and forest resources is restricted by accumulation, heterogeneous local communities become spatially constrained and struggle to sustain rural livelihoods; they sometimes intensify cropping on the land they have, or seek additional land to extend crop production. Their claims and demands as well as their interests, attitudes, and responses towards large land acquisition vary depending on their socio-economic and political status and gender but revolve around maintaining access to sustainable livelihoods, rather than securing “ownership” (Vermeulen and Cotula 2010). Competing claims to ownership of parcels of land, or even use rights, inevitably provoke conflict. Disputes over boundaries, and the erosion of the terms and conditions of legal agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoU), are common.

Theories of peasant resistance also help us to understand both why conflict occurs and the sociocultural implications of such conflict. Land represents important spiritual and social values, and economic valuations cannot capture local feelings or explain the visceral reactions to some land deals (Vermeulen and Cotula 2010). Open resistance is less common among communities without political power or status. It is conducted in different ways subject to their political and economic agency, as will be shown, and depending on social structures, strengths, and capacities (Moreda 2015; Scott 1987).

2 Primitive accumulation is elaborated on by Karl Marx in *Capital, Volume 1*, to explain the onset of capitalist accumulation.

There are theoretical explanations for societal resistance and the movements it gives rise to (Adnan 2007; Das 2007; Isaacman 1990; Kerkvliet 2005, 2009; Malseed 2008; Scott 1976, 1985, 1987). Restoring socio-economic identities and moral economies, the wellsprings of peasant politics, drive some conflict. Scott shows that “subaltern” people belittle dominance and are rarely passive victims of it (Scott 1985: 290). Where the morality of “the subsistence ethic” is disrupted, everyday resistance (foot-dragging, sabotage, and so on) has political meaning, particularly where open resistance is not possible (Scott 1985). Kerkvliet defines resistance as

what people do that shows disgust, anger, indignation or opposition to what they regard as unjust, unfair, illegal claims on them by people in higher, more powerful class and status positions or institutions. (Kerkvliet 2009: 233)

People in subordinate positions struggle to affirm their claims “to what they believed they are entitled to based on values and rights recognised by a significant proportion of other people similar to them” (Kerkvliet 2009).

Resistance, therefore, consists of the *intention* to act and the act itself. Peasant reactions against exploitation and oppression can be unorganised, individualised, and localised forms of insurgency that “do not make headlines” (Moreda 2015: 525). Scott says these forms of peasant actions are “real” and part of economic and political struggle by “subordinate classes” (Scott 1985: 292), and that

the goal, after all, of the great bulk of peasant resistance is not to overthrow or transform a system of domination but rather to survive [...] within it. (Scott 1987: 424)

The debate provides us with clues to understand local actions in Nguti Subdivision, where active and passive forms of resistance are still being triggered against the Herakles project.

The Study Region, the Herakles Project, and the Research Methods

The Case: Nguti Subdivision, Southwest Cameroon

Nguti Subdivision is part of the larger Koupé-Manengouba Division in Anglophone Southwest Cameroon (Figure 1). It is located along the Kumba–Mamfe Highway, which provides access to neighbouring Nigeria. Tropical forests are extensive, and rich in biodiversity (Linder

2013). There are protected areas and forest reserves of high conservation value (HCV) including the Banyang–Mbo Wildlife Sanctuary (69,147 ha), the Nguti Council Forest (11,919 ha), and the Bakossi National Park (29,320 ha) (H&B Consulting 2011). Farming is the principal local activity (Nguti Rural Council 2009). Over 80 per cent of this study’s respondents grow food and cash crops, particularly cocoa (Nguti Rural Council 2009). Local communities also depend on the harvesting of non-timber forest products like eru (African jointfir, *gnetum africanum*).

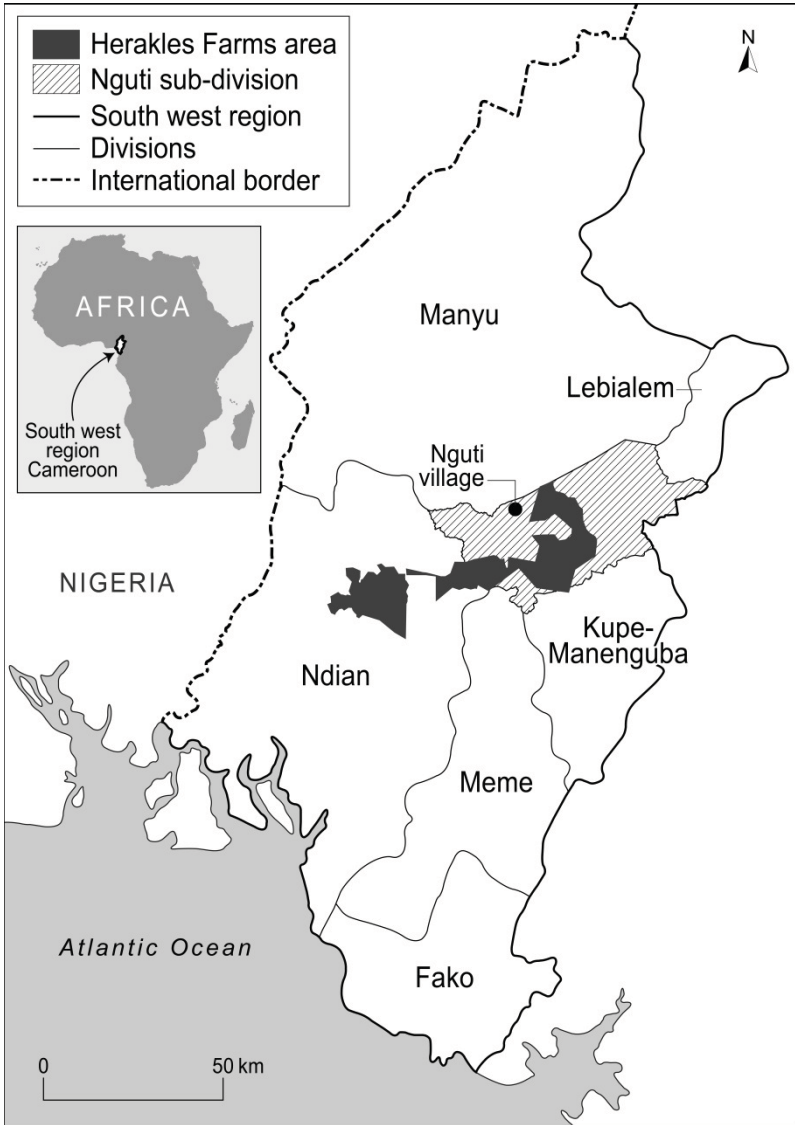
The subdivision incorporates three patrilineal clans: the Upper Balung, Mbo, and the Bassosi. The Upper Balung clan numbers about 6,000 people (Achobang et al. 2009). The Mbo, the most remote, live around the Banyang Mbo Wildlife Sanctuary, and Chief Tabi Napoleon of Baro estimated their population at 15,000 individuals. The Bassosi clan is the largest, at around 18,000 people (Nguti Rural Council 2009).

All three clans have their ancestral lands earmarked for the development of agro-plantations sanctioned by the government. It was alleged by respondents that one Upper Balung chief masterminded the establishment of SGSOC in the region, and through his influence, most villages in the clan have ceded land to this company. The Bassosi villagers have refused to allocate land, due to unmet conditions (Ndi 2017). The focus here is on the complexities surrounding land in the three Upper Balung communities of Manyemen, Ebanga, and Talangaye that have already ceded land to SGSOC.

The Project: Herakles Farms’ (SGSOC’s) Controversial Oil Palm Project

Herakles Farms is a US company. It is an affiliate of Herakles Capital and the parent company of SGSOC (Achobang et al. 2009). On 17 September 2009, SGSOC signed a land lease with the government of Cameroon to establish palm oil plantations in the Southwest Region of the country. The company acquired 73,086 hectares of land in the three subdivisions of Mundemba, Toko, and Nguti on a 99-year leasehold (see Fonjong et al. 2015). SGSOC’s Social and Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) indicated that it would utilise 60,000 hectares of the land for oil palm nursery development, palm plantations, and refineries. The remaining land would serve as “protected” zones for environmentally or socially sensitive resources, plantation infrastructure, and land for village livelihood activities (Achobang et al. 2009).

Figure 1. Project Location in Southwest Cameroon



Source: Chandra Jayasuriya, adapted from Greenpeace (2013).

Although the project promised employment and better living standards, it generated controversy from the outset. Local communities (with the support of national and international environmental advocates) expressed

concerns over the project's possible social, environmental, and economic consequences (Nguiffo and Schwartz 2012; Fonjong et al. 2015; Greenpeace 2013, 2014; Nature Cameroon 2011; Oakland Institute 2012). In September 2011, critics filed a formal grievance with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO),³ citing inadequate environmental assessments and unsupported claims made by SGSOC (Linder 2013). But in August 2012, SGSOC withdrew its membership of RSPO, arguing that the grievance process was causing delays to its activities (Achobang et al. 2009; Linder 2013).

Perhaps as a response to the numerous contestations and appeals, the government of Cameroon passed a decree in November 2013 granting a temporary lease of three years and downscaled the company's concession to 19,843 hectares (Nguiffo and Schwartz 2012; Fonjong et al. 2015; Schwartz et al. 2012). Despite this decisive move, many people, especially those whose livelihoods are directly and indirectly linked to land and forest resources, continue to oppose SGSOC's lease of the land. Those whose farmland falls within the reduced concession boundaries still fear losing their land to palm oil plantations and ancillary activities.

In the absence of any formal boundary demarcations, coupled with the fact that local communities lack sufficient legal proof to delimit their territorial boundaries, the residents of Manyemen, Ebanga, and Talangaye villages find it increasingly difficult to make justifiable claims against the agro-company or to determine the limit of their own village lands. The authors were told that, in the past, oral histories and natural features were used to demarcate approximate territorial limits, but now the threats to land access have overrun these boundaries.

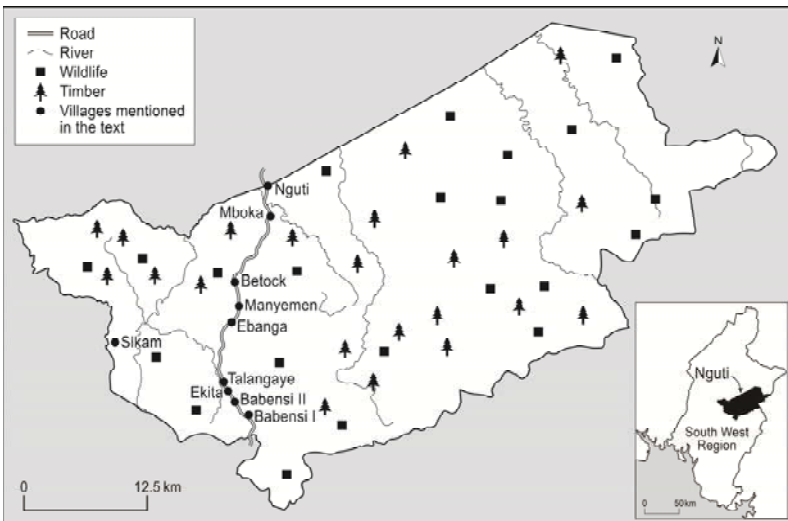
Data Collection Methods

The research was conducted in three villages in Nguti Subdivision whose lands were acquired for the development of agro-industrial plantations (Figure 2). Focus group discussions, interviews, documentation, and field observation took place from March to November 2015. Approximately 50 interviews were conducted in each village with male and female subsist-

3 RSPO requires that its members or applicants implement a robust FPIC process (see page 50) with local communities; refrain from clearing or pressurising HCV areas; comply with all national laws in their countries of operation; and publish a new planting procedure (NPP) informational document at least 30 days prior to planting oil palm or clearing land to make way for planting. SGSOC was unable to implement some of these standards and processes, leading to its withdrawal (Achobang et al. 2009).

ence farmers, small producers, company employees, and hunters and gatherers. The languages used were English and Cameroonian Pidgin English.⁴ Ten interviews were conducted with the divisional officer (DO), a mayor, the subdivision’s delegate of agriculture and his assistant, and NGO personnel, all of whom were based in Nguti village, the subdivisional headquarters. Another two key interviews were conducted in each of the villages with local chiefs, politicians, and the council of elders. Each interview lasted approximately one hour; some were conducted informally because of the sensitive nature of LSLA in Cameroon. Two focus group discussions were held in each village: one with women and one with small producers and subsistence farmers (mostly men).

Figure 2. Nguti Subdivision



Source: Chandra Jayasuriya, adapted from Nguti Rural Council (2009).

Efforts to interview SGSOC representatives were unsuccessful. At the time of fieldwork, it was rumoured that the company was experiencing financial and managerial crises, and there were criticisms from activist organisations and local communities. The company’s doors were shut to all researchers, especially those from foreign universities. In some instances, local government interviewees attempted to address some con-

4 Cameroonian Pidgin English is one of many dialects of West African Pidgin English used widely in the region, especially among those who are not formally educated.

cerns on behalf of the company, but the authors were unable to verify some of the statements made by interviewees, including accusations against the company, which skewed the analysis.

Interview participants were asked what they knew of the company and whether or not they were participating or had participated in SGSOC's activities; if there was any prior consultation; what project benefits and challenges have emerged; and what local development prospects there were. Questions were broad to obtain a picture of land-use conflicts in the region, but specific to the local communities concerned. The authors used notebooks and recordings to compile field data; however, the majority (70 per cent) of participants did not want their voices to be recorded, so most interviews, group discussions and field observations were handwritten.

Secondary data was elicited from published and unpublished scholarly and technical sources, including reports from national NGOs like Nature Cameroon (NC), Struggle to Economize the Future Environment (SEFE), the Centre for the Environment and for Development (Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement, CED), and international organisations including the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Greenpeace, and the World Bank. This assisted the researchers' understanding of land tenure and governance systems, and also the nature and dimensions of conflict occurring across rural communities affected by LSLA projects.

Land Politics, Agribusiness Development, and Conflict

In Cameroon, the question of who owns land is contentious because the rules governing ownership are implied rather than clearly stated (Sone 2012). Ordinance No. 74, Section 1, Subsection 2 of 6 July 1974 states,

The state shall be the guardian of all lands. It may in this capacity intervene to ensure rational use of land or in the imperative interest of defence or the economic policies of the Nation.

This was supported by Decree No. 76/165 of 27 April 1976, which set the rules governing land tenure and the processes involved for obtaining a land certificate. Government officials representing the state adhere to the 1974 ordinance as the only legitimate tool to justify its ownership of land that lacks private ownership certificates.

Section 1 of the ordinance is ambiguous and contradictory. It states that "the state guarantees to all natural persons and corporate bodies

having landed property the right to freely enjoy and dispose of such lands” (Ordinance No. 74-1 of 6 July 1974). The meaning of “natural persons” and “corporate bodies” is not made explicit; and the statement implies that local Cameroonian communities also have ownership, sale, and disposal rights. However, in reality this is not the case, because existing land laws do not fully recognise their customary tenure.

Attempts by local government to restrict access to land and forest resources tend to contradict the generations-old system of customary land access. Administrators often argue that local or indigenous populations have the right to use land, but not to own it as property. One senior government official in Nguti Subdivision said in an interview, “Communities have the right to use the topsoil, but they cannot claim ownership unless they have a land certificate” (18 May 2015). This statement suggests that, even with a land certificate, individuals might not have rights to subsurface mineral resources.

Customary tenure institutions recognise land as a collective resource that can only be owned by communities or a group of people with a common lineage. Land belongs to a vast family, including the dead, living, and unborn (see Fonjong et al. 2010). Traditional leaders or family heads serve as custodians, and allocate land to individuals according to farming, hunting, and settlement requirements (Baye 2008; Chilver 1963; Sone 2012). Authority resides with communities, with local chiefs usually serving as land administrators. This keeps local conflict over use rights at a bare minimum, since chiefs and elders are regarded as ancestral representatives (Mqeke 2003). In addition, land is viewed as a primary source of sustenance, as well as an element of nature (Fisiy 1992; Yanou 2009). It is, and was, seen as a conduit through which local communities relate to their ancestors socially and culturally, and this interaction has a significant impact on control, ownership, and management (Sone 2012; Yanou 2009).

The privileges enjoyed by local populations under customary law often conflict with legal codes. Subsections 14 and 15 of Ordinance No. 74, Section 1, 6 July 1974, state that all lands, including those under customary tenure without a land certificate, are state-owned irrespective of the length of time they were occupied. Since land titles are the only legitimate proof of land ownership, but are too difficult and expensive for most local communities to obtain (Fombe et al. 2013), corporations (both national and international) are able to automatically invalidate customary tenure and render it redundant through existing legal provisions. As Cotula et al. (2016: 24) argue,

Overall, this situation leaves the occupants of 90 per cent of the land in Cameroon with insecure rights, making them “de facto squatters” on their customary lands.

The insistence on land certificates is further justified and consolidated by Decree No. 76/165 of 27 April 1976, which states that “land certificates shall be unassailable, inviolable, and final.”

According to this decree, land concessions are granted to foreign individuals or corporations based on certain procedures, terms, and conditions, usually for a period of up to 99 years. In principle, the applicant has to submit an application to the minister in charge of land, requesting a land parcel. Allocations exceeding 50 hectares require the approval of the Cameroonian president. The application should consist of a map of the proposed area, a listing of the activities to be carried out, and a project development plan (Achobang et al. 2009). Depending on the assessment by the authorities, feasible projects are considered. The government grants land rights in two phases and under certain conditions: the first involves a temporary grant for a maximum period of five years; and the second is conditional upon the satisfactory implementation of the activities planned. Government officials authorised to allocate land are specified in the decree granting the lease (Achobang et al. 2009).

It is important to note that state approval does not guarantee access, because communities have frequently resisted or contested proposed projects (Vermeulen and Cotula 2010). In practical terms, the land acquisition process ought to incorporate a joint decision between the government on the one hand, and local communities on the other (in particular land users and “traditional owners”). Agreement is needed on whether land should be allocated to investors or new owners, and for what purpose (see Schwartz et al. 2012). Local people and other interested parties need opportunities to consent to or challenge proposals. This did not happen with the land deal signed in 2009 between the government and Herakles. A senior authority in the region noted that this top-down approach was typical:

The company’s approach was poor [...]. They came with a map from Yaoundé, indicating the areas to be acquired [...] [H]aving those maps does not guarantee them access [...] my people resisted. We had some agreements with them although many people were not involved or consulted. (Interview, 11 May 2015)

A conventional “top-down” approach to land acquisition has operated across many large land deals in Cameroon, often leading to conflict. The Herakles negotiations bypassed local land users and “owners,” indicating

power asymmetry. The state, investors, and local elites at the “top” benefited directly from the project. Local communities sit far below them further “down” on the social ladder (particularly those poor peasant and semi-subsistence farmers on traditionally owned land).

Previous studies in Africa show that local peoples’ passive and active resistance can create considerable challenges for investors, persisting even where land was legally acquired from the government (Baye 2008). In Southwest Cameroon, rural communities that claimed ownership of land based on customary tenure contested Herakles’ land deal, claiming it was illegal and violated customary use rights.

The Axis of Political Conflicts

This section shows the different dimensions of conflict generated as a result of land acquisition by SGSOC. Local communities without any legal proof of ownership of land are in conflict with one another (“horizontal” conflicts), and also with the agro-company, which has the support of the state and is backed by existing legal provision and a handful of local elites and politicians (“vertical” conflicts). The people of Nguti Subdivision alter their choice of strategy depending on the socio-economic and political context in which they find themselves facing dispossession. The varied forms of political conflict instigated by LSLA are now outlined here, with particular attention to the conflicts among villages and with the agro-company. These flow from the SGSOC claim, but are nested within an agrarian system of shifting allegiances and land uses.

Conflicts between Local Communities and SGSOC

Encroachment of Forest Land and Destruction of Crops

Interviewing in Ebanga village, the authors uncovered concerns over encroachment. In a letter dated 31 March 2012, the chief of Ebanga addressed a complaint to the DO for Nguti, lamenting the widespread invasion of Ebanga village farmlands by SGSOC, urging the administration to intervene. The chief mentioned that SGSOC had sent a letter to the village on 20 August 2011, in which the company proposed a “joint demarcation of farmlands.” A meeting was intended to settle boundaries and avoid future encroachment into land already farmed, but the company failed to show up. On 12 December 2011, Ebanga village had received a second letter. An excerpt reads:

We regret that we could not carry out the demarcation exercise as planned [... and] we kindly request that you select a number of able bodies and knowledgeable men and women in your village who will work with SGSOC's technical team to demarcate areas of current farmlands and buffer zones for future village use and sacred sites. The marked areas will not be used by the company. (cited in the letter written by the chief of Ebanga on 31 March 2012)

The chief stated in an interview that the village was still waiting, in 2015, for this joint exercise to take place. But in the meantime, he said they had been surprised to see that SGSOC's technical team had hammered pillars into people's farmlands and in the forest. He said that the villagers assumed that this meant the company had demarcated its "property," particularly as they claimed to have government support. During interviews, the authors were informed that Ebanga village is pursuing legal measures through the local administration to stop the company from further encroachment.

Some farmers complained of the destruction of crops in those same areas. According to them, encroachment and crop destruction without compensation is a violation of an agreement made during a meeting convened by the DO on 25 September 2009, preceding SGSOC's establishment. A clause in the meeting's minutes states that "the company shall provide compensation to persons concerned in case of any destruction of crops caused by the company." The impression gained from the interviews was that the company has so far refused to acknowledge most of the allegations of the destruction of crops and farmland. In the few cases where they have acknowledged it, informants said that compensation has still not been made, although the authors were unable to corroborate this claim with the company. The authors were also told about a similar event of crop damage at cocoa farms cultivated by seven Manyemen farmers over 76 hectares, with no compensation received at the time of the interviews.

Farming communities from Talangaye also reported crop destruction and the acquisition of ancestral land, despite the fact that they were the first village to be pressured into accepting the presence of SGSOC in Nguti Subdivision. Given the active role played by the elites of this village in facilitating regional land grabbing, several interviews revealed massive dissatisfaction among the members of local communities with their elites. Communities generally expect elites to represent their interests, or to act as "development brokers," but this was not the case. The authors were told that these individuals had put their own interests above those of their communities.

Invasion and Destruction of Cultural Sites

Some villagers in the subdivision are also in conflict with SGSOC because of the company's inability to recognise and respect cultural sites like shrines, graveyards, and sacred groves that are of sociocultural and symbolic importance. Interviewees told the authors that in Babensi II and Talangaye, SGSOC has invaded and destroyed village shrines and forest groves in an attempt to create passages for the extraction and transportation of timber, and also for the movement of workers. Communities considered this intrusion into private spaces as taboo, disturbing their relations with ancestors. An elder from Talangaye village stated,

Our lives also depend on those shrines. When we have problems or someone commits a taboo, our kinsmen go into the shrines to appease our ancestors. (27 October 2015)

In addition, interviews revealed that graves had been destroyed. According to one respondent, the tampering of the grave of an ancestor, especially by an "outsider" or a "foreigner" is an act of violence against the village.

Unfulfilled Promises Made by the Agro-Plantation Company

Interviewees said that the MoU signed on 27 July 2010 has not been respected in and around all the villages where the company's plantations are established. For example, the company's promises to provide electricity and healthcare facilities have never materialised. Field observations and discussions with some government officials confirmed this, although they made statements suggesting that the company would fulfil all its promises in the future. Some participants claimed that, at present, there is effectively no valid MoU between the company and their communities because SGSOC has defaulted on its side of the agreement. A chief from a nearby village who currently resides in Manyemen argued:

There is no MoU between Manyemen and SGSOC because, the company has failed to provide basic social amenities as promised, like piped water, electricity, etc. We need to establish new agreements. (13 May 2015)

Worse still, the villagers (especially farmers) are aggrieved by the company's unwillingness to provide compensation for crops destroyed. Interviews with seven farmers in Manyemen revealed that the company would prefer to take their land and then compensate them because the land is located in the middle of its concession. The local government authorities, however, countered by saying that the crops were planted

after the company had declared its intentions and had earmarked the areas as part of their domain. They argued that, at the time of acquisition (2009–2010), the land was “empty.” A visit to the contested site in 2015 confirmed the administrators’ claims. The first author grew up in a similar farming community and has experience with cash crop farming. He was able to examine the stems of the cocoa and banana trees to ascertain when they were planted. Normally, it takes between three to five years for a cocoa plant to bear cocoa pods; however, none of the cocoa trees he examined had fruits. Therefore, it is doubtful that the farmers actually planted the crops before 2009. While the farmers may be resisting through dissimulation (Scott 1985), adverse land acquisition had clearly taken place, causing dispossession and destruction of crops. One of the farmers hinted:

SGSOC struggled to seize our farms, they failed, they tried to buy the land, we refused [... so] they went ahead and destroy[ed] our crops claiming the land was empty [... and] when we complained, they promised compensation yet to be paid. (6 June 2015)

The authors were told of similar unfulfilled promises in Ebanga where crops were also destroyed. Compensation was promised, but not delivered. Some direct confrontations resulted between the affected people and the palm oil plantation workers in 2014. These incidents were uncommon prior to the establishment of the company.

Criminalisation of Local People

Interviewees also indicated that local communities whose lands have been allocated for agro-industrial plantations are also affected by the assertion of power by local chiefs and elites. Villagers are subject to strict controls on any activity that might jeopardise the company’s interests. In Manyemen, for example, some farmers, speaking anonymously, said that company interests were protected by some of their neighbours, who were paid to report any actions that seemed contrary to its activities. Farmers with destroyed crops are not allowed to resist overtly or to reveal information to anyone investigating the company’s activities. They did not like to talk in public or where they could be seen, or to be identified as troublemakers during interviews. Where affected populations have tried to complain about company actions, the company has interpreted this as a threat to its operations and its workers. The authors observed that without any legal backing, the interests of those who have the power to influence institutional and administrative frameworks continue to prevail. One farmer had this to say:

SGSOC is trying to make us criminals in our own land. They have encroached into my farm [...and] mapped out some sections. Because I have warned them not to trespass, they claim I have threatened them and are trying to criminalise me. How can a foreign company intrude into our village and instead of them acting peacefully, they rather want us to be victims of their plantation [...]? (27 October 2015)

The story is one of intimidation and insecurity. Everyday forms of resistance are common in such situations, such as the planting of crops on land earmarked for development, to delay commercial cultivation by claiming prior occupancy. While there are always traditional disputes over land access, LSLA has magnified and criminalised local assertions of use rights and tenure.

The Sidelining of the Local Population in the Land Acquisition Process

The approach used by SGSOC to acquire land across the Nguti Subdivision is top-down and elite-based (Fonjong et al. 2015, 2016; Ndi 2017). In Manyemen, a farmer contended,

When SGSOC came into our village, they invited some few elders who agreed to give out our forest without our consent... The elders forced us to accept certain conditions, which were later on reflected in the MoU. The worst thing is that even the promises made in the MoU have not been respected. (8 June 2015)

The same approach was used in Talangaye and Ebanga. In the agreement between the company and Manyemen village, Ebanga was considered part of Manyemen. This implied that the people of Ebanga had nothing to say or to suggest with respect to deciding whether or not they were willing to cede land. This is a clear violation of the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC),⁵ which should be central to every LSLA process (H&B Consulting 2011). Meanwhile in Talangaye, it was alleged that the village head masterminded the arrival of the company for personal gain (Etaboben 2014), and expanded his network to convince other smaller

5 FPIC is formalised through Article 32 of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Its fundamental principle is that indigenous people have the right to approve or veto proposed development on their lands, based on full information, representative institutions, and iterative, culturally sensitive negotiation, backed up by effective systems of grievance, redress, and mitigation (Colchester and Ferrari 2007, cited in Vermeulen and Cotula 2010).

villages like Ekita to accept it. However, the authors did not find this village head to be in possession of any material incentives from SGSOC.

Inter-Village Conflicts

LSLAs provoke additional local conflict, largely invisible in the modernising narrative associated with externally directed monocultures. This took place in a cluster of three villages (Manyemen, Ebanga, and Talangaye). Rather than fighting off external requests for land, in this case there was a struggle to appropriate land from neighbouring villages to then offer to Herakles. Geographically, Ebanga is situated between Manyemen to the north and Talangaye to the south. These villages allocated land to Herakles Farms from 2010 onward. The cause of the inter-village conflict was the quest for royalties, in anticipation that it would be paid based on the area ceded. As a result, the three villages struggled to acquire patches of land from each other in order to increase their total land surface, and to in turn allocate a larger quota to the agro-plantation.

Manyemen claims to share a common boundary with Talangaye, but not with Ebanga (Figure 2). The people of Manyemen argue that Ebanga is actually a satellite village of Manyemen. Thus, they want to claim royalties as far as the boundary with Talangaye. This is to some extent an “invented” boundary dispute fuelled only by the possibility of economic gain, and it is disputed.

SGSOC grouped Ebanga and Manyemen together in the negotiations (as Ebanga–Manyemen). This was heavily contested by the people of Ebanga, exacerbating inter-village conflict. Ebanga claims to be an independent village, liberated from Manyemen in the 1970s and given the status of chiefdom. The people of Ebanga argue that they share a common boundary with Talangaye (to the south) and Manyemen (to the north), although the SGSOC land lease unifies them. This unification disadvantages Ebanga because it is smaller and its residents fear that they might not benefit substantially from the royalties that will be disbursed to the unified “Ebanga–Manyemen.” Ebanga prefers to exist as an independent community and to receive its own royalties. Manyemen is against the separation, and prefers to remain united in order to obtain greater payments. A native of Ebanga, who resides in Manyemen, spoke against the union and argued that Ebanga could indeed be disadvantaged, although ultimately Ebanga might lose more land to the company. Another Ebanga farmer noted,

Because Manyemen allocated land to SGSOC does not mean it should encroach [upon the] land of Ebanga people [...] Ebanga has

chiefdom just like Manyemen. Ebanga has not legally given land to SGSOC. We have complained to the director of SGSOC [...] to no avail. We have contacted a lawyer to help us draft a letter of complaint to the government. (5 June 2015)

In addition, Ebanga is in conflict with Talangaye to the south because the latter has refused to recognise Ebanga as a neighbour. Some Ebanga residents are already accusing the village head of Talangaye of supporting the project, leading to the current land conflicts.

Talangaye claims to share a boundary with Manyemen, which would entitle it to all land royalties as far as the border, subsuming Ebanga into its territory. One interviewee mentioned how the conflict became vocal at a meeting that took place on 22 May 2015 in Kumba. The territorial dispute was clearly linked to expected financial payments.

These conflicts may seem mundane, but as Ribot and Peluso (2003) note, they can escalate with far-reaching socio-economic and cultural implications. First, there is the lack of trust on the part of villagers vis-à-vis their leaders, as the former feel betrayed by the latter. Interviews and field observations revealed that communities no longer revere their chiefs, despite their position as representatives of the ancestors (see Mqoke 2003). Many respondents remained sceptical about whether their chiefs and elites might be able to offer them the support and protection they require. If SGSOC has paid some community members to serve as watchdogs against others, as they allege, then further distrust has been generated just as the oil palm frontier is advancing and communities need to be united.

A second implication is the continued decline in sociocultural networks and enduring relationships. The chiefs of all three villages are believed to be descended from the same ancestor (Nguni Rural Council 2009). As a result they occasionally feast together, symbolising unity and love for one another. During such gatherings, village elders deliberate the development of their region, but most importantly how to practise and promote culture. The authors were informed that, because of the growing lack of trust between village leaders, important sociocultural events like these have declined.

Third, land is seen as an element of nature – for relating with one's ancestors (Fisiy 1992; Sone 2012; Yanou 2009), and also as a resource to cater for basic economic necessities. The quest for royalties by the different villages and groups has reduced ancestral heritage to a mere commodity, as land is commodified to meet neoliberal market demands. Many participants argued that the loss of land, particularly sacred groves,

severs their connections with their ancestors. Some said that they are now unable to perform any rituals at all.

The fourth implication is the alteration of village history to secure more land. Traditional village boundaries are increasingly being contested across the region. This is not new, but the authors were told that in the past, traditional conflict mechanisms would be deployed in gatherings of the chiefs and the council of elders, with the chiefs of other villages acting as mediators and peace-seekers. But today, villages in conflict are required to seek legal and administrative redress through local government authorities. This is a relatively new development. And yet, conflict between these villages is not violent and has not yet escalated, because of the recognition that they all originate from the same ancestor, meaning there is a fear of ancestral retribution. A farmer commented,

As farmers, we could feel the tension when we go into the forest to farm or to do hunting. Phrases such as “this bush is our bush” are common when we meet with another farmer or hunter in the forest.

Such statements are sources of conflict, a respondent said, because in some instances, farmers end up quarrelling and retelling village histories. The stories are about asserting and then justifying rights to the same forest. As Sara Berry has noted, increasing struggles over tenure security have “followed myriad social fault lines, pitting national and local elites against ordinary citizens, neighbor against neighbor, kinsman against kinsman, and husbands against wives” (Berry 2002: 639). This is the situation in Nguti Subdivision today.

Discussion

The authors have shown how a poorly conceived and implemented LSLA project by Herakles Farms has generated competition over land and resistance amongst communities in Nguti Subdivision. Contemporary land policies in Cameroon, which insist that land certificates are the only legal proof of land ownership, undermine the generations-old system of customary tenure with which most rural communities are familiar. Foreign land investors like SGSOC take advantage of such policies to acquire large tracts of untitled land without the consent of local people and without making provisions for alternative livelihoods for the dispossessed (Ndi 2017). The manner of land acquisition by SGSOC has attracted widespread criticism in Cameroon and beyond, and it has been resisted by local populations (Fonjong et al. 2016; Ndi 2017).

The evidence presented here demonstrates the different dimensions of conflict instigated by the plantation project. It also shows how an unfriendly atmosphere of inward competition for, and outward contestation of, claims to land threatens access to secure local livelihoods. The authors argued that, first, the top-down approach used to acquire land in Cameroon ignores or marginalises the voices and interests of those on the land, nourishing existing and new local conflicts. There is a form of “dispossession” of land and of livelihoods. In this case, seeking only the consent of a few influential people in affected communities violates the principle of FPIC that should be central to every large land acquisition. Furthermore, the inability of the agro-company to consult all (potentially) affected villages (like Ebanga) explains the confusion that has arisen over boundaries and access to land, as well as the different types and forms of criticism these villagers levy against it.

Second, the authors argued that dispossessed communities struggle inwardly with other neighbouring communities to acquire parcels of land for which royalties may be paid, and outwardly with the agro plantation company to contest encroachment into their forests. This dual form of resistance echoes Scott (1987) and Adnan (2007), in showing that conflict is perpetuated by unequal power relationships between actors. In addition, affected communities seek compensation for the destruction of crops, but lack the power to push their demands through.

Villagers have been partially successful at resisting the alienation of land, but largely because the company has insufficient resources on the ground at present to occupy and extract full value from it, given its short period of tenure and an unclear business model. Herakles has not yet put all its land into continuous production. This has generated much uncertainty, itself a basis for struggle over “access to livelihoods.”

To guarantee rural livelihoods, peace and stability in this region, the conventional approach to large land acquisition – a transfer of “ownership” to commercial interests in the expectation that rewards will trickle down to the local poor who are now dispossessed – needs to be revisited. Ideally, this would involve (1) proper consultation and rights of veto, and (2) adequate safeguarding of land that is most beneficial economically and socioculturally to local communities. Eliciting and reporting community concerns while also recognising socio-economic realities would lead to very different outcomes.

Conclusion

The literature, through a growing number of case studies in Africa, demonstrates that top-down or corrupt land deals on the scale experienced in Southwest Cameroon will always generate some form of resistance. The authors have explored some of the complexities it has generated, with particular reference to cross-scale governance, inter-village disputes, and community resistance that has taken several different forms. While the obvious conclusion is that investors should ensure transparency, respect existing land and resources rights, and guarantee local food security (Cotula et al. 2009; Von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009), these calls have generally gone unheeded.

In particular, the national government needs to institute laws that require local communities to approve all land transfers before any development can take place (as in Mozambique and Tanzania; Vermeulen and Cotula 2010). While it is outside the scope of this article, many respondents expressed an interest in greater commercial activity in which they can play a part in the future; there are cooperative palm oil processor operations elsewhere in the region that offer a way forward. This is, in part, a recognition that such a fertile and productive region is unlikely to remain isolated from commercial pressures for much longer. The inclusion and participation of communities in investment projects through binding MoU is one way forward, as investor interest grows (Ndi 2017). The extent to which people will lend their support and effectively engage in palm oil and other agro-projects will depend on how much their present and future needs, interests, and priorities are considered, whether through leaving customary rights intact or in terms of leases and concessions. At present, local contestation prevails within communities and against major investors seeking further land deals. The land conflict across multiple levels of governance and across a large forested region persists because equitable access to land is being threatened in the context of adverse tenure laws. This ultimately undermines the success of foreign investment in the region. Tropical Africa may be “rising,” but local voices cannot be ignored.

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Land Grabbing und politische Konfliktlinien: Einsichten aus Südwestkamerun

Zusammenfassung: Großflächiger Landerwerb (large-scale land acquisition, LSLA) durch ausländische Investoren ist ein Hauptmotor für Agrarwandel in den fruchtbaren Regionen des afrikanischen Kontinents. In den ländlichen Gebieten Südwestkameruns, in denen die gewohnten Formen der Landnutzung und des Zugangs zu Land durch kommerzielle Interessen bedroht sind, haben LSLA politische Konflikte ausgelöst. Die Autoren zeigen die Spannungen auf, die aus Versuchen entstehen, die Existenzbedingungen zu bewahren oder neu zu definieren, und zwar einerseits unter lokalen Wettbewerbern um Land und andererseits gegenüber Ansprüchen externer Interessenten. In Nguti Subdivision, dem Schauplatz von Protesten gegen ein Agrarunternehmen, ist eine anhaltende Debatte über die ideelle Bedeutung von Land und die Interessen an Landnutzung und Landbesitz entstanden. Die Autoren zeigen auf, wie die bisherigen Landnutzer durch von oben autorisierte Landkäufe marginalisiert werden und wie daraus Konflikte zwischen Gemeinden und investierenden Unternehmen entstehen. Sie kommen zu dem Schluss, dass erfolgreich und konfliktfrei verlaufende Agrarprojekte nur dann möglich sind, wenn die Dominanz elitärer Interessen inklusiveren Prozessen weicht.

Schlagwörter: Kamerun, Agrarstruktur, Grundbesitz, Land Grabbing, Bauern, Lebensbedingungen, Sozialer Konflikt