



## **Multinational Working Group on Economic Research Programme**

### **Call for Proposals**

#### **Theme: Land grabs and food sovereignty in Africa**

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) is launching a call for proposal for all interested researchers and academics in its Multinational Working Group (MWG) on a theme titled: **“Land grabs and food sovereignty in Africa”**. MWG is one of the flagship research vehicles that is employed by CODESRIA to promote multi-country, multi-disciplinary and inter-generational reflections on critical questions of concern to the African social science research community. Each MWG will be led by two coordinators who have different specializations and possibly constitute a gender mix. The size of a single MWG should utmost be fifteen researchers. An independent selection committee will screen the proposals and select those that have a relatively better quality and depth. The life span of the project will be 18 months during which time all aspects of the research process should be completed and the final manuscript submitted for publication in a CODESRIA book series.

Land grabbing is not a new phenomenon. The exploitation of land and natural resources in Africa went through distinct epochs that have had profound impacts on land tenure and the state of natural resources in the continent. The scramble for African farmlands and natural resources reached its height in 19<sup>th</sup> century with the partitioning of the continent and the plundering of its land and natural resources by European colonizers. This had left in its wake a gruesome legacy that is characterized by a series of land and resource conflicts, land litigation, loss of peoples’ control over land and natural resources, exposition to alien land tenure systems and natural resources management. Yet the on-going global land grabs risks creating a reinvigorated neo-colonial system that enhances the power of cash-rich nations and transnational corporations at the expense of smallholder peasants and indigenous communities who are displaced and dispossessed. The scale, magnitude and discourse around the current global rush for farmland makes this moment unique in history.

With the emergence of food and financial crises in 2008, the acquisition of fertile land for outsourced food and fuel production, viz. land grabbing, has been occurring at an astounding pace across the globe. Incidentally, the virtual collapse of the global financial markets occurred nearly contemporaneously with the global food crisis. Triggered by the inter-related forces of skyrocketing food prices and the global economic meltdown, the land grab trend has demonstrated how fertile lands can be turned into a “new strategic asset” for governments seeking food security and for profit-driven financial firms hunting safe havens for their investment funds. Cash-rich nations such as China, Saudi Arabia, Japan, South Korea, and some Gulf States are pursuing food security strategies that seek to secure control of millions of hectares of fertile lands in target nations in the South, most particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. In short, land scarcity and volatility of food prices in the world market have led the richer countries that are dependent on food imports to acquire large amounts of land in the South to produce food for their domestic needs.

Africa is hence once again facing a new scramble for the accelerated exploitation of its rich land and natural resources facilitated by the forces of globalization and neo-liberalism. The governments and ruling elites in Africa are offering up large swathes of agricultural land at rock bottom prices for large-scale farming. This renewed scramble under various economic agreements is already leading to increasing conflict, land dispossession, eviction and displacement and deepening poverty amongst various groups, including smallholder farmers, pastoral herders and fisher folks on the continent. Favourable terms for foreign investors in recent deals include low process on purchases and low rates of remuneration on long-term leases, all justified under the “win-win” rhetoric of modern agricultural development. Some governments are also liberalizing property ownership laws to facilitate the influx of foreign capital. Research by the World Bank and others suggests that nearly 60 million hectares – an area the size of France – has been bought or leased by foreign companies in Africa in the past four years.

The land deals are often couched in a “win-win” language, with the presumption that target nations in the South could secure the following benefits: obtain funds for infrastructure improvements and rural development; overcome decades of underinvestment in the agricultural sector; create a sizable number of jobs and bring in new technology to the local agricultural sector. Conversely, some studies have revealed that large-scale farmland acquisitions by foreign actors’ raise a litany of human rights concerns for impoverished people in the South, the most important of which include the undermining of local food production systems, extraction of short-term profits at the cost of long-term environmental damages, the forced displacement of smallholder peasants and indigenous people, diminished access to resources by the rural poor, and the expansion of the export-oriented, agro-industrial complex. In addition, deforestation & environmental degradation, the erosion of cultural and labour rights and the potential for civil unrest are also matters of great concern, as is the general lack of transparency and accountability. Some fear that unrestrained land grabbing could produce scenarios where heavily guarded foreign-owned farms ship food overseas while starving locals look on helplessly. Research proposals that will be prepared in the framework of this MWG should try to come up with innovative ways of conceiving “land grab” through a systemic analysis that could capture the diversity, complexity and controversy of this phenomenon. An inquiry can also be made to uncover the geopolitical and geostrategic dimensions of land grabbing in Africa. Furthermore, a particular attention should be paid to the historical roots of contemporary land grabbing.

The commoditisation of land does also reflect the transition from a rural society characterized by a large number of subsistent small-holder peasants to one that is increasingly based on the expansion of capital-intensive production enterprises to feed the rising urban population. This phenomenon can also be seen as a type of land grabbing in which governments together with foreign investors are promoting the dispossession of farmland that in turn evokes rural-urban migration. So far, not much is known about land grabbing that is induced by rural-urban migration-cum-urbanization. Put another way, rapid urbanization grabs massive land in Africa or is gobbled up by cities. This issue can stir up the attention of prospective MWGs to establish the type and strength of the relationships between land grab, migration and urbanization.

The failures and inequities of the world food system have spurred a new vision for the democratization of the food system based on a set of principles known as food sovereignty. The most fundamental pillars of food sovereignty include: the recognition and enforcement of the right to food and the right to land; the right of each nation or people to define their own agricultural and food policies; respecting the rights of indigenous peoples to their territories and traditional fisher folks to fishing areas; a retreat from free trade policies, with a concurrent greater prioritization of production of food for local and national markets, and an end to dumping; genuine agrarian reform and peasant-based sustainable agricultural practices. Land grabs deny land for local communities,

destroy livelihoods, reduce the political space for peasant oriented agricultural policies and distort markets towards increasingly concentrated agribusiness interests and global trade. Without national and international measures to defend the rights of people living in poverty, this modern-day land-rush looks set to leave too many poor families worse off, often evicted from their land with little or no recourse to justice. The global land grabs dispossess peasants not only the land per se but also the social, political and economic entitlements and freedom that come with it. That is why it remains a direct threat to the foundations of food sovereignty. The mobilization against land grabs, which *ipso facto* denotes the movement for food sovereignty, is a reflection of the present food regime's geography and demographics in which over half of the world's food is produced by small scale farmers making up one-third to over seventy percent of producers in the global South. Researchers in this MWG should assess the degree to which land grabs present a threat to the food sovereignty of peasants in Africa.

Proponents of land grab deals do often characterize the land involved as “idle” or ‘underutilized or “marginalized”. However, according to a report by the FAO and the International Institute on Environment and Development, lands that are so perceived by government and large private operators do, in most cases, provide a vital basis for the livelihoods of poorer and vulnerable groups. In actual fact, they have a real purpose: they may support corridors for pastoralists; dispense fallow space for soil recuperation; provide access to limited water sources; set aside plots for future generations or enable local farmers to increase production. Participants in this MWG can probe deeper into these issues to repudiate the flawed and misleading ways on which land grabbing is grounded in Africa. The research findings that are derived from such studies can either clarify or nullify misleading analyses on land use and land cover in Africa. The recommendations that would come out of such analyses are expected to generate alternative models of managing land use while addressing food and energy security needs and respecting land rights.

For women all over the world, lack of access to and control over land is a major determinant and outcome of gender inequality. Evidence from research on land grabs in Africa suggests that women are getting a raw deal or unfair treatment. To begin with, women's land rights are less secure and more easily targeted. They also depend more on secondary uses of land, which tend to be ignored in large-scale land acquisitions. Furthermore, although women comprise the majority of farmers in Africa, men effectively control the land and the income derived from it at the expense of the fruit of women's labour. In practice, a new commercial opportunity often means that men assume control of the land at the expense of women's access. The new competition for land between biofuels and food crops, leading to less availability of food and higher prices, is also likely to affect women more than men, as the former tend to take responsibility for feeding the family. Given this state of affair, forthcoming MWGs are expected to pay special attention to the gender dimensions of land access and land grabs in Africa.

The prospective MWGs can also look into the global interest in biofuels and the impact they have on global warming/climate change. It is stated that a range of biofuel crops now being grown to produce ‘green’ alternatives to oil-based fossil fuels release far more CO<sub>2</sub> into the air than what can be absorbed by the growing plants. In spite the precipitating effects of food-based biofuels on global warming and climate change, many countries are inadvertently promoting biofuel alternatives that are worse than the fossil fuels they are designed to replace.

### **Sub-themes**

- The political economy of land grabbing and resistance
- Remaking the maps of food production and distribution in Africa
- Transnational agricultural investments and the human rights to food in Africa
- The impact of land grabs on food sovereignty of peasants
- The historical roots of contemporary land grabbing in Africa

- Biofuel production, global warming and climate change in Africa
- Land grabs and women in Africa (the gender dimension)
- The discourse and contested meanings of land use/cover classifications
- The ecological threats of large-scale land acquisition
- The geopolitical and strategic dimensions of land grabbing in Africa
- Land grab, urbanization and migration nexus
- Any other related issue

### **Submission of Research Proposals**

CODESRIA calls for the submission of research proposals on one of the above-mentioned sub-themes, or other related issues in regional, national or sub-regional contexts in Africa. Authors of selected proposals will be invited to participate at the CODESRIA MWG methodological workshop. Proposals should include the following:

- A clear statement of the purpose of the project and the issue to be studied;
- Well-articulated problem statement
- A comprehensive literature review on the chosen sub-theme that can show the gap(s) to be filled by the envisaged research;
- A description of the methodology to be used;
- A calendar showing activity or work plans with their respective time horizons;
- An estimated budget breakdown in USD;
- The resumes and/or bio-data of the researchers;

Please note that the proposals should not exceed 20 pages. Format your proposal with a **Times New Roman typeface, a font size of 12 and one-and-half line spacing.**

All proposals should reach the CODESRIA headquarters in Dakar not later than the **31<sup>st</sup> of August 2012**. Proposals will undergo a review process the outcome of which will be announced by the **30<sup>th</sup> of September, 2012**. Selected applicants will be invited to participate at a launch methodological workshop which will be held in **November 2012**.

Proposals, applications and queries, if any, should be sent to the following address:

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