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Abstract

The paper analyses the socio-economic implications of land grabbing among the Nuer people in the Gambella region of Ethiopia. To achieve its goals, the study is underpinned by two interrelated questions. The first question is: what are the socio-economic implications of land grabs in the Gambella Region of Ethiopia? The second question reads: what are the contestations and perceptions of the Nuer peoples in terms of gains and losses from the land grabs? The study was carried out among a Nilo-Saharan group known as the Nuer which traces its roots from Sudan within the qualitative research methodology. Findings from the study shows that land grabbing, which comes through large scale land takeovers in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, contradicts a state-remaking project under a dispossessive political economy. It was noted that the land grabs destruct the Nuer people's identity, strip them of their dignity, disturb their ancestral philosophies, and negatively affect their livelihoods.

Keywords

Nuer, Gambella, sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia, land grabbing, livelihoods, identity, dignity, ethnography, qualitative

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A Qualitative Inquiry into the Socio-Economic Implications of Land Grabs Among the Nuer People in the Gambella Region of Ethiopia

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The paper analyses the socio-economic implications of land grabbing among the Nuer people in the Gambella region of Ethiopia. To achieve its goals, the study is underpinned by two interrelated questions. The first question is: what are the socio-economic implications of land grabs in the Gambella Region of Ethiopia? The second question reads: what are the contestations and perceptions of the Nuer peoples in terms of gains and losses from the land grabs? The study was carried out among a Nilo-Saharan group known as the Nuer which traces its roots from Sudan within the qualitative research methodology. Findings from the study shows that land grabbing, which comes through large scale land takeovers in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, contradicts a state-remaking project under a dispossessive political economy. It was noted that the land grabs destruct the Nuer people's identity, strip them of their dignity, disturb their ancestral philosophies, and negatively affect their livelihoods.

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Introduction

Before the colonization of Africa by Europeans which started during the 16th century, most rural people in sub-Saharan Africa owned a piece of land on which they could do their farming (Makki & Geisler, 2011). Besides farming, land among most people in sub-Saharan Africa was an asset on which they not only constructed their livelihoods but also their identities. In the context of the forcible land takeovers to pave way for new owners, which in the context of this study is termed land grabbing, rural livelihoods are at stake and most feel that their identities are lost since what they regard as their ancestral lands have been taken from them and given to large-scale commercial farmers and investors (Makki & Geisler, 2011; Moyo et al., 2019; Rutherford, 2017). The land grabs differ, but in most cases, there is no informed consent of the original owners of the land by the host governments. Mostly, land grabs take place without the independent oversight and fair participation of the local peoples. As a result, no prior assessment of the social, economic, and environmental implications of these land grabs on the ordinary people are made. This as a result leads to the violation of human rights, especially the rights of those who are seen as the "other" in societies, such as women and minority groups (Alden-Wily, 2012).

Although the issue of land grabbing in Ethiopia and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa has received scholarly attention and scrutiny, the socio-economic implications of land grabs among ethnic minorities in the lowlands of Ethiopia such as the Gambella region is not well-

studied. I take a more nuanced approach to studying the socio-economic implications of land grabs in the Gambella region of Ethiopia with the aim of investigating how these have led to livelihood vulnerabilities among the Nilo-Saharan group known as the Nuer in Ethiopia. In line with the argument by Oliveira et al. (2021), I argue that the land grabs have led to undesirable socio-economic implications and enshroud what Ferguson (1994) termed political projects by the ruling elite of the highlands whose aim is to control the lowland periphery. I also follow Harvey (2003)'s and Gebresenbet (2016)'s arguments that the land grabs in the lowlands of Ethiopia reconstitute the century old centre-periphery relations through undertaking a process of accumulation through dispossession. In light of this, the objectives of this paper are to:

1. understand the socio-economic implications of land grabs in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, and
2. investigate the contestations, perceptions of the Nuer peoples in terms of gains and losses from the land grabs.

Literature Review

Justification of Land Grabs

Food security and land grabs

Despite the negative socio-economic implications of land grabs on the local people who are evicted from their ancestral lands to pave the way for large-scale land takeovers, the land grabs are justified on various grounds. Some governments have facilitated and justify land grabs on the grounds that they are the only way to ensure that citizens secure food that is affordable (Cousins et al., 2018; Nally, 2014; World Bank, 2010). Thus, the issue of food security has been used to justify land takeovers by large companies involved in food production since the mid-1970s. For Nally (2014), the issue of food security has mostly been used as an ideologically neutral concept and as the pre-political idea that is seen as a global good.

The “yield gap” and land grabs

Besides justifying land grabs on the food security grounds, land grabs are also justified on the grounds that there is need to close the yield gap (Cousins et al., 2018; Bellemare & Bloem, 2018; Rutherford, 2017). Those who justify land grabs are of the view that the available land is not producing to its full capacity, hence what they term a “yield gap.” The argument for the need to close the yield gap is based on the argument that land in Africa has a high yield potential which is not realized due to poor methods of farming. In this context, it is argued that there is need to fully utilize the available land and ensure that its potential is fully realized, and in the end, close the yield gap. For instance, land in most sub-Saharan African countries, according to the World Bank, is not used to full capacity. The World Bank's report, *Rising Global Interest in Farmland*, argues that this unused farmland should be targeted for foreign direct investment (Li, 2011; Nally, 2014).

Land grabs and the logic of “depeasantisation”

Apart from this, the logic of “depeasantisation” is also used to justify land grabbing from the local people. In its report of 2008, the World Bank regards land grabs as land

investments that should be pursued above anything else. Under this argument, peasants of the developing countries are seen as not able to compete with large scale farmers and are encouraged to abandon farming and take up wage labour instead (Abebe, 2019; Goldstein & Yates, 2017; Li, 2011).

The logic of depeasantisation argument propounded by the World Bank is closely linked to the “yield gap” argument by Li (2011). The logic of depeasantisation is based on the assumption that there will be massive urbanization in the developing countries in the same way urbanization took place in the developing world during the 1700s and 1800s. In light of this argument, it is then assumed that those who will be left in the countryside will be employed as wage labourers on the farms that will be taken over by large-scale farmers (Li, 2011). While the left bemoans the death of the peasantry, the right sees the death of the peasantry as a blessing in disguise. For rightist economists such as Paul Collier, peasant agriculture is not well-suited for investment and innovation (Nally, 2014, p. 14). Collier (2008) argues that “...preserving peasant agriculture is a ‘retreat into romanticism’ since commercial agriculture is what the world needs going forward” (n.p.). Arguments by those who favour the land takeovers by large-scale commercial farmers trace their roots to the Victorian era, during which, Victorian elites saw the African peasants and the Irish cottier tenants as not hardworking and as primitive. They did not think peasants capable of any improvement and as a result, saw their farming as doomed and bleak.

Land grabs and the “power of solitude”

Linked to this argument on the logic of depeasantisation is what is called the “power of solicitude” (Nally, 2014; McKay, 2018). Under this, land grabbing is driven and justified based on the goal of taking care of those who are neglected and stricken by privation. Those who support this argument state that Africa has the largest number of those who are facing hunger and poverty. As a result, the land deals are justified on the grounds of the need to feed the starving Africans. Those who support this argument state those food shortages present a serious threat to world prosperity and as such, fully utilising the underutilised land in Africa should be prioritised (Goldstein & Yates, 2017; McKay et al., 2020; Nally, 2014). This argument was as a result taken over by those who were for the Green Revolution, an agricultural revolution driven by those who argued that there was need to ensure that all arable land was put under crop production. The argument is also supported by those who support land grabbing now (Abebe, 2019; Araghi, 1995; Corbera et al., 2017). As a result of these assumptions, land grabs are accelerated in the developing countries, a situation which has seen the dispossession of the peasantry from its land. This has mostly led to negative socio-economic implications on the peasantry (Bellemare & Bloem, 2018; Li, 2011; McMichael, 2012; Oliveira et al., 2021).

The “free market” and land grabs

Land grabs are also justified on the grounds that the problems in agriculture can only be solved through a free market in which there will be transparent pricing, trade liberalization, and where property rights are enforceable (Nally, 2014). This argument is anchored on the argument that subsistence agriculture is not in a position to solve the problems seen in agriculture today. In light of this, the Global Harvest Initiative (2011, p. 3) “...trade is a tool that can link supply to demand, as a result, the liberalisation of trade has a very important role to play in the promotion of the world food security through ensuring that global food systems are more effectual”. This argument was supported by the World Economic Forum under what is called the New Vision for Agriculture. These market-based

approaches to solving the problems seen in agriculture do not support small holder agriculture and see it as not able to fully compete with commercial agriculture on the global markets (Goldstein & Yates, 2017). A clear contrast between subsistence agriculture and commercial agriculture is not very clear. As a result, the World Food Programme (WFP) in 2009 came up with a report which recommended that food markets should enhance proper allocation of resources in ways that will ensure that the poor get the resources that they need to produce food for their own consumption and surpluses for sale. The WFP report of 2009 noted that the poor have mostly been disenfranchised when it comes to the allocation of resources.

Regardless of all these arguments used to justify land grabs, evidence shows that land grabbing has had malignant effects on both the environment and the people from whom land is taken (Borras & Franco, 2012; Levien, 2011; White & Dasgupta, 2010). In the context of these land deals which are taking place on a rapid scale in almost all continents, understanding the problems of exclusion, dispossession, and the adverse incorporation faced by local communities has never been more pressing (White et al., 2012). In light of this, I ask questions which read:

1. What are the socio-economic implications of land grabs in the Gambella Region of Ethiopia?
2. What are the contestations, perceptions of the Nuer peoples in terms of gains and losses from the land grabs?

Research context and researcher positionality

I am an African scholar from Ethiopia. After having spent some time among the Nuer people gathering data on the effects of land grabbing on the local people, I found myself grappling with the question: how best can the plight of these people be addressed? My answer to this question was that the only way to help them is to be a social activist who can use writing to ensure that the outside world and even the national government can pay attention to the needs of the people in question. Thus, as an academic scholar of Ethiopian nationality, my aim is to help the Nuer people of Ethiopia, whose land has been taken and given to foreign investors, indirectly by writing about their experiences and plight as a result of the land grabs.

Methodology

Meta-theoretically, this study was an ethnographic study guided by the qualitative research paradigm. Studies rooted within the qualitative paradigm are usually evidence-based. They are mainly aimed at collecting data with the goal of making sure that the authentic voices of participants can be heard (Allen, 2016). Qualitative studies create an avenue for the researcher to have a very critical and in-depth understanding of the social and cultural norms of a given people. When using a qualitative research approach, the researcher enters the contexts and collects data through insights gained from actually being in the field and gaining thick, descriptive, rich, and in-depth information (Creswell, 2014).

Given the objectives of this study, the qualitative research approach was appropriate since it created a platform for the researcher to have a fuller and nuanced understanding of how people of different gender roles, social classes, and age, among other matrices of difference, strategize to integrate the varying aspects of their lives in the context of land grabbing (Clow & James, 2014, p. 96). Additionally, the qualitative research approach was important since it is used answer questions about the multifaceted nature of land grabbing

with the aim of describing and understanding this phenomenon from the participant's point of view (Wilson, 2012, p. 130). The ways through which the participants made sense of the issue of land grabbing could be best understood through the qualitative research approach, given the fact that their views were subjective and differed from one person to another.

In the context of this study, purposive sampling was used to sample the suitable participants. When using the purposive sampling technique, participants or units to a certain study are selected in ways that increase the likelihood of all pertinent units to a study to be selected. As a result, purposive sampling includes the deliberate selection of the sample population of the study based on the judgment of the researcher. Purposive sampling involves identifying and deliberately selecting information-rich sources for a particular study. Purposive sampling is mainly concerned with the selection of a small population who have deep knowledge of a given research topic (Mugera, 2013, p. 4).

There are a number of sub-categories of purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). One of these is what is known as purposive intensity sampling, which was used to select all participants who took part in this study. When using intensity sampling, the researcher makes an effort to collect some preliminary information before making the actual selection of the suitable participants (Patton, 1990, p. 171). In this study, I carried out some exploratory work with the aim of determining the variations of the issue under study. Purposive sampling made it possible to select unique cases whose different characteristics were of great importance to this study. I selected the participants in this study based on the following criteria:

1. That they were the local people of Gambella who were driven away from their land to pave the way for the foreign companies, and
2. That they were community leaders who lead the local people who lost their land to pave the way for the new foreign owners.

I gathered data through an ethnographic study done over a period of a year in the Nuer region of the Gambella region of Ethiopia¹. Focus group discussions were used to collect data from the local people from whom land was grabbed. Using focus group discussions, participants are brought together with the aim of getting a fuller understanding of a particular issue. Mostly, focus group discussions are made up of a maximum of ten participants who will be involved in a particular research activity or have certain experiences which they share (Neuman, 2003). The key aim of a focus group discussion is to collect significant information on a given issue (Neuman, 2003, p. 34). Focus group discussions are mainly advantageous in that the researcher will be in a position to collect data about a specific issue from a group of people and in the end, save time (Marvasti, 2004, p. 24). In a focus group discussion, participants are in a position to remind each other about information that can be easily forgotten in instances where only one participant is interviewed. Thus, participants in a focus group discussion are in a position to spark off one another and, in the end, suggest dimensions and various nuances to a given study that would be unforeseen during the start of the study. This, in the end, makes it possible for participants to have a critical understanding of a given problem in a nuanced manner. Participants in a focus group discussion are in a position to discuss specific issues in a multi-vocal nature. This, in the end, creates an avenue for participants to remind each other about important information (Tombindo, 2014, p. 5).

Due to these advantages, focus group discussions were utilized in collecting data from local people who had lost their land to foreign companies. In each settlement, one focus group discussion was carried out with male members of the settlements. Each focus group

¹ Ethiopia is a sub-Saharan African country found in East Africa – the horn of Africa to be particular. It shares borders with Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia. The Gambella Region in which this study was carried out is situated in the southwestern part of Ethiopia.

discussion comprised ten male participants who were selected using the purposive sampling technique. Efforts to carry out focus group discussions with the female members of the community were fruitless. Since there were political upheavals in the country during the time collecting data, the community leaders advised the researcher against carrying out focus group discussions with women for security reasons. I conducted the interviews in person with the help of a local research assistant from a local community who helped with the translations sometimes to the local language of Amharic. I asked questions on the issue under discussion from a semi-structured interview guide. Each focus group discussion took thirty to forty-five minutes to complete. I took down notes in a field diary during the discussions to augment an audio recorder that was used. All focus group discussions were conducted in the local language of Amharic and were later translated into English with the help of a local research assistant. The places of residence of the community leaders in each of the five settlements were the rendezvous for all the focus group discussions.

I also utilized key informant interviews to collect data. Mostly, key informant interviews are face to face engagements between a researcher and an expert on a particular issue (Pope & Mays, 2000). Key informant interviews were used to collect data from the government official from the Ministry responsible for the administration of land and the representatives of the companies that were given land in the Gambella region. Interviews with these key informants were arranged a week in advance. All interviews with key informants were done face to face. Interviews done with the Ministry officials and officials of the companies that were given land were done in English. A total of two ministry officials and three company representatives were selected for interviewing using the intensity purposive sampling technique. Questions asked to these participants concerned their views on the effects of land grabbing on the local people and Ethiopia at large. Each in-depth open-ended interview took between fifteen and twenty minutes to complete.

A total of five community leaders, one from each settlement created by the government following the evictions to pave way for the new owners, were also chosen using the purposive sampling technique. These community leaders were individuals who were chosen by the local people as their representatives and acted as leaders who represented the interest of the locals during any kind of meetings or programmes. Data from community leaders were gathered through using guided walk interviews. Also known as the mobilities model, guided walk interviews contrast the traditional methods of data collection in which participants are interviewed *in situ*. Guided walk interviews in the case of this study involved the physical movement of the researcher and the participants. When using the guided walk interviews, the researcher interviews the participants while walking together with the participant from one place to the other (Dube et al., 2014). Guided walk interviews involve walking with the participant(s) in order to enhance a profound engagement with the physical and social context in which an inevitable occurrence will happen (Sheller & Urry, 2006). When carrying out guided walk interviews, the researcher can observe the actions of the participants without necessarily interviewing them or may interview them when they are carrying out their daily routines (Dube et al., 2014, p. 1093). Guided walk interviews were chosen due to their importance in ensuring that participants recall data about a certain experience as they walk through certain landscapes and places in which occurrences under study would have taken place. Thus, the surrounding landscape and setting in which the guided walks were done invoked discussions about the issue of land grabbing. Evans and Jones (2011, p. 851) note that when doing guided walk interviews, a researcher must take into consideration the knowledge both the participant and the researcher has regarding the places and settings in which the interviews will be done. When carrying out guided walks, consideration must be taken on who gets to choose the paths and localities taken during the walks (Evans & Jones, 2011, p. 851). Places are essential to the general aim of the research,

have an effect on the ways in which data is collected (Dube et al., 2014, p. 1093), and are significant to participants since they create a platform for participants to have a deep reflection of their experiences as they share contextualised understandings of their daily life experiences with the researcher (Dube et al., 2014, p. 1093).

In the context of this study, the researcher came up with a semi-structured interview schedule from which questions were asked during the guided walks. Questions asked were regarding views and perceptions on the evictions. The researcher personally did the guided walks with the community leaders as they moved around the areas where the community members were evicted from to the new settlements. Although an interview guide was used, the community leaders were given the platform to air out their views without any interruption. The aim of this was to fully gather data from the participants and in the end pursue all interesting tangents. Only one guided walk interview was done per each community leader from the five settlements from which the local people were drawn for focus group discussions. Each guided walk interview session took ten to fifteen minutes to complete.

Guided walks in the context of this study were done whilst the community leaders were carrying out their daily activities. Activities that were done by the community leaders during the interviews differed from person to person. For instance, some participants chose to take the researcher to the nearby forest to collect firewood, some to the nearby water source to collect water, and some to the grazing field to herd animals. The landscapes and places which the researcher and the participants passed by during the interviews invoked discussions on the issue under study. In the context of this study, the participants chose all the routes that were taken for guided walks. Guided walks gave the researcher a unique way of understanding how the participants made sense of their day-to-day lives and experiences as invoked by place. The guided walks produced rich data, which was very important in making a deep exploration of the views of the participants regarding the issue under investigation.

During the guided walks, the researcher took note of the interaction patterns of the community leaders with the community as well as the routes which the participants chose to take when walking with the researcher. During the guided walks, note was taken of non-verbal cues and the interaction patterns of the participants. The researcher was able to explore what the participants actually did and how they behaved. These observations were carried out in natural settings and not a constructed world. The researcher took down notes on features and landmarks which the researcher and the participants passed by. Key to each route that was chosen by the participants was the importance of “place” in recounting each participant’s daily lives and experiences as the community leaders.

There were a number of ethical considerations in the context of this study. In any research involving human subjects, a researcher must ensure that participants are respected, justice and fairness is ensured, and also that the truth is always told to the participants before the start of any study (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2000, p. 121). Ethics include the fundamental principles of honesty, fairness, informed consent, minimization of harm, and respect for a participant’s right to privacy, among other principles. Creswell (2014, p. 139) states that risk is defined as the likelihood that harm may take place. Harm is also defined as the negative effects that result from given research either in a direct or in an indirect way. Harm and risk include loss of time, loss of privacy, loss of competitive opportunities for the participants, physical or psychological pain, and financial loss, among other issues. Efforts should be made by the researcher to ensure that all these are mitigated (Creswell, 2014, p. 139). In this study, the government officials and the company representative risked losing their time during the interviews. As a result, with the aim of minimizing the loss of their time, the interviews were done during the most convenient time for the participants. The community leaders and the local people who took part in this study risked being victimized

by the government as a result of participation in this study. To circumvent this, the researcher made efforts to conduct the study at the community leaders' houses which were considered safer and where the possibilities of harm and victimization were seen as minimal by the participants.

Another ethical issue that was observed in this study was informed consent. Informed consent is the permission that a researcher is given by the participants for interviewing or carrying out a study with them (Lewis, 2003, p. 70). Before taking part in any study, participants should be within the legal age limit to take part in a given study. Thus, a participant must be in a position to make independent decisions on whether to take part in a given study or not. All participants who took part in this study were above the age of eighteen, were therefore within the legal age limit (Lewis, 2003, p. 70) to grant permission to take part in this study, and were in a position to understand what the purpose of the study was. Participants gave informed consent in this study verbally. All participants who took part in this study participated voluntarily. Anyone who felt the need to withdraw from this study was allowed to. No payment was given to the participants with the aim of enticing them to take part in this study, since doing that would have compromised the principles of voluntarism (Creswell, 2014).

Participants in the given research have the right to privacy. In that regard, the researcher must make all the necessary steps to ensure that all private and sensitive information in given research should be kept private and confidential (Lewis, 2003, p. 70). In this study, all names were anonymized and pseudonyms were used in the place of the actual names of the participants in order to protect their privacy. Since a research assistant helped in the data collection process, the research assistant was asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement in order to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and the data gathered. Deception is the deliberate falsification of what the aim of the study is to the participants (Creswell, 2014). In this study, deception was avoided by fully disclosing what the study was all about to the participants.

In order to overcome the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic during the data collection process, the researcher wore a mask and urged the participants to also wear their masks. All participants were hand sanitized before the data collection process. All participants strictly adhered to social distancing protocols. The participants sat one metre away from each other during the focus group discussions. The researcher also observed the social distancing principles during collecting data among the key informants and the community leaders. To ensure that the study was done within ethical protocols, the researcher approached the Gambella Regional Government's Institutional Review Board on the Protection of Human Subjects and got an ethical clearance form.

Data Analysis

The thematic approach was used to analyze the data that was gathered in this study. As a data analysis approach, the thematic approach is a qualitative data analysis approach that is focused on examining and closely analyzing themes that emerge from a certain data set. This is achieved through a critical analysis of data gathered and not merely counting words or phrases in a given data (Creswell, 2014). In the context of this study, I used the thematic approach in order to organize and describe the data that was gathered from the participants in great detail. Through using this approach, I was in a position to fully interpret the various aspects of the issue under study in great detail. I used the approach to search for recurrent themes and patterns in the data that I collected. I first transcribed the data I gathered and then checked it for errors before editing it. I then analysed it, interpreted it, and verified it before making generalisations.

The data were first reviewed for accuracy and familiarisation. During the analysis stage, data sets gathered were broken down into parts which were meaningful. This was achieved through identifying important statements or narratives enclosed in the data. Assertions are statements made by participants which are semantically complete and logical. Assertions can either be sophisticated or simple. Assertions which are simple make only one statement, whilst assertions which are sophisticated can include two or more semantic expressions or logical relationships (Gauch, 2002, p. 67). The researcher highlighted the data that did not fit into any of the categories formulated for this research and deleted it. The researcher then performed preliminary open coding of what the participants shared. This preliminary open coding was decided on through notetaking on the meaning of the data in line with the categories under which data were presented and delimiting the field notes made in the field diary. The goal of this delimitation was to extract the information that was appropriated from the data collecting process. Thus, data analysis involved coding each relevant assertion.

Subsequently, the analysis included reviewing each transcript for accurateness and for immersion in the data. During this step, the researcher engaged in initial open coding of the narratives through producing notes of initial themes and their meanings in the margins. Coding concurrently took place with the induction of themes and understanding of the meaning of data (Cawood, 2011, p. 148). Coding in this study included the coding of physical evidence of the semi-structured interviews. This was achieved by delineating interview transcriptions in order to extract the relevant information on the issues under investigation. Coding was done manually and was pen- and notebook-based. All prior coding was done on the original notebook which was used during data gathering.

Afterwards, the coding system was reviewed and data iteratively analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Peers from the University of Pretoria gave advice during the data collection and analysis processes as part of member checking. For instance, meetings with a peer from the University of Pretoria encompassed evocative discussions to clarify the method and explanation of the findings. The evocative discussions between the investigator and peers influenced the themes that were taken into consideration by the researcher. All analysis was completed manually in light of the constructivist nature of the study.

Once the data analysis was completed, the data were verified by the researcher through revisiting the notes taken. I rectified all the discrepancies before giving the anonymized data to my peers for peer debriefings. The data were anonymized through using an alias in order to protect the identities of the participants. The peer debriefings led to suggestions on the issue of land grabbing. The peer debriefings led to critical reflections on the issue under investigation in ways that brought new dimensions to the issue under study. After the process of data analysis, I made efforts in discovering the relationships of the concepts identified and the data that I had collected.

Results

Presentation of findings

From the data gathered, participants stated a number of socio-economic implications of the land grabs. Participants stated that land grabbing led to the destruction of their identities; it led to the destruction of their livelihoods, breaches of their dignity, and destruction of their ancestral philosophies. These findings and interview excerpts to support these are presented below.

Destruction of Identity

Land to African people means a lot of things. Apart from merely producing food and building their dwelling, land has a number of meanings which go way beyond this. In the case of the Nuer people of Gambella, land has deep philosophical meanings which define who they are as a people. From the data gathered, the Nuer people noted that land is important in shaping their identities. In the context of the evictions from their land to pave way for the new owners, the Nuer people who were interviewed stated that this amounted to the destruction of their identities. Hence, the destruction of identity featured as one of the effects of land grabbing on the Nuer people of Gambella. This was noted by one of the local people interviewed who said:

It is a very intricate issue which is of course very contextual and peculiar to African cosmology and ways of belief I think. It might be found in other cultures but I cannot speak on behalf of other cultures. Land among Africans, or at least among the people of Gambella here gives people their sense of self and being. You are a person because of the land. Our identities are defined by this land. The land defines us. If you cut our ties to the land you are literally destroying the tapestry or fabric that makes us a people. For us to fully function and be psychologically stable, which is very critical for how we work, it is because of this land. This is where the issue of identity comes in. So the moment you drive us from our land, you would have literally cut the umbilical cord from its mother. We just stop functioning. It then affects a lot of things. In this instance, the way we were driven away from our land had adverse effects on how we construct positive livelihoods because we simply lost our sense of self and identity (Brian-FGD Discussion, 02/05/21).

As noted from the interview excerpt above, it is critical to note that the Nuer people of Gambella attach meanings to the land which are beyond simply constructing livelihoods and building their homes. Land according to the people of Gambella is about their “selves.” It is where they bury their dead; it is where they carry out their cultural practices. Removing them from their land thus leads to the stripping, and hence, destruction of their identities.

Destruction of Livelihoods

In addition to the destruction of identities, participants stated that the land grabs disturbed their livelihoods. The destruction of identity was of course closely connected to the issue of livelihoods. Participants stated that it is the land that facilitated construction of sustainable livelihoods through the rearing of livestock and crop production. But due to the land grabs, most stated that they are no longer able to construct sustainable livelihoods. One of the participants said:

... People have lost their livelihoods as a result of these land grabs. People’s livelihoods were anchored on this land. People were into crop cultivation and animal husbandry. This they no longer do because their land was taken away from them. They are simply destitute because of these land grabs... (Edward, focus group discussion, 03/05/21).

The excerpt above clearly shows that before their displacement, the Nuer people constructed their livelihoods on the land through crop cultivation and animal husbandry. It is

clear that through using the land for agricultural activities, the Nuer people were in a position to construct sustainable livelihoods which enhanced their wellbeing. As a result of the land grabbing which led them to lose their land, the Nuer people of Gambella are experiencing livelihood shocks, hence their failure to construct sustainable livelihoods in their new and cramped settlements.

Breaching People's Dignity

The issue of dignity also featured prominently from the data gathered. The Nuer people of Gambella stated that land grabs not only destroyed people's livelihood and their identities, but it also breached their dignity. Participants stated that the land is important in defining their dignity. As a result, taking the land away from them was a breach to their dignity as a people. One of the participants said:

... The land gives people dignity here. If you do not own the land, then you do not have any dignity. Our land gives us dignity because for us to be a people, it is this land. Dignity and respect go hand in glove. Without the land, then everything goes to waste. On this standpoint, therefore, the land gives us our daily bread, the food and well-being that we so cherish as well as our dignity... (John, guided walk interview, 04/05/21).

From the above excerpt it is clear that land ownership gives people their dignity. This is also linked to the issue of respect because as noted, one feels as not belonging and thus devoid of respect if they do not own land. Thus, owning land nourishes people and gives them their sense of being which they will be deprived of in instances of land grabbing.

Destruction of Ancestral Philosophies

Closely linked to the destruction of identity was the destruction of ancestral philosophies. The local people who were interviewed stated that land belonged not only to the living but to what they termed the "living dead." As a result, they argued that the land grabs herald the disturbance of this arrangement and were thus seen as negative. One participant noted:

I understand Westerners may not be very conversant with our cultural norms and values. They might see what we believe in as stupid and not sensible. What we believe in is that the land belongs to the living living and the living dead. That is African philosophy and everything we do is in consultation with our living dead. They still mean a lot to us. We should always consult them in everything in what we do. These people were not at all consulted and we therefore cannot say the way land was taken from us was in agreement with us. The way we understand it all is that the land should never be taken by anyone else who is not one of us. It is priceless and can never be sold or exchanged for anything. From this standpoint this arrangement they have done is an abomination (Peter, guided walk interview, 08/05/21).

The interview excerpt above echoes the fact that land has meanings which go beyond simply constructing livelihoods among Africans. The quote above captures critically important information that radically departs from the old narratives of livelihood construction. Land, to Africans, is not owned only by the living but is an asset owned

communally, with the “living dead” or the ancestors being seen as the custodians of the land. Taking away land from the people is thus seen as a breach to these principles, and therefore a destruction of their ancestral philosophies.

Discussion of Findings

Ethiopia, just like other developing countries in Africa, is engaged in massive development projects in which the natural resources are used as key drivers for development. Despite changes in the government, some economic projects started by the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) since 2001 have been taken up by the new government with renewed vigour. The registered growth during the tenure of the EPRDF and the new government has made the chances of Ethiopia joining the middle economic countries realistic (Moller, 2015). Growth in the economy of the country is key to the vision of the new government as was the case under the previous government (Gebresenbet, 2015). The growth of Ethiopia is mostly driven by massive investments in the infrastructure (Moller, 2015). This approach is accompanied by the inclusion of variegated approaches to development characterized by the commercialization, intensification, and specialization of smallholder farming in the highlands of the country. The approach is also characterized by the sedentarisation of the local population and the setting up of large-scale agricultural investments in the lowlands of the country such as the Gambella region (Gebresenbet, 2015). Regardless, because of a number of factors, the approach that was preferred to develop the lowlands has not in a way improved the livelihoods of people who live in the peripheral lowlands of Ethiopia such as Gambella (Markakis 2011).

In the backdrop of the global food, financial, and fuel crisis which reached its peak in 2008, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa became a target for what became known as the global land rush (Deininger, 2011). The first major deal that was done by the Gambella People’s National Regional State came in September and October 2010 when it entered into an agreement with an Indian firm known as Karuturi Global and a Saudi firm called the Saudi Star Agricultural Development. Although the extent and magnitude of the deals are different and keep changing, Ethiopia is considered as one of the top countries involved in mega land deals in sub-Saharan Africa (Anseeuw et al., 2012; Cotula, 2012). Land deals in the Gambella region are taking place as part of the developmentalist mission enunciated by the EPRDF and adopted by the new government. The aim of this mission is to bridge the divide in social and economic indicators between the developed highlands and the developing lowlands hence doing away what was known as the two-tier federal system (Dessalegn, 2014; Young, 1999). However, this arrangement represents a historical continuation of the centre and periphery relations in which the lowlands are not given the same preferential treatment as the highlands (Dereje, 2013; Lavers, 2012; Makki, 2012; Markakis, 2011).

There are a number of processes that are followed before land is taken away from the local people in the Gambella region. First, there is what is called the preparation phase. During this phase, large portions of the land are labeled unused, which then makes it ready for its transfer to investors. The second phase is called implementation, during which land is then taken from the local people and given to the investors. The implementation stage is then followed by the sustenance phase, during which state intervention ensures that the local people do not resist the land grabs. Land grabs in the Gambella region are done without any compensation to the people who lose their land (Oakland Institute, 2011). Due to cultural biases, the ways through which the people in the Gambella region construct their livelihoods are seen as irrational and wasteful. The land takeovers are as a result seen as a rationalization process which is necessary (Gebresenbet, 2016). The categorization of the Gambella region and other regions in the lowlands of Ethiopia is mostly dependent on the extent of political

marginalization of a particular ethnic group occupying a certain territory. From this, land dispossession is an actual expression of marginalization and powerlessness, and in most cases the socio-economic implications on the population from which the land is taken are negative.

The findings in this study regarding the socio-economic implications of land grabbing cohere with other studies such as those done by Godfray et al. (2010), Daniel (2009), Makki and Geisler, (2011), Malik (2011), Goldstein and Yates (2017), Borrás et al. (2013), Klinger and Narins (2018) among others. What however is novel in this study is the fact that the effects of the land grabs to the Nuer people go beyond negatively affecting their livelihoods. As noted in the data presented above, the effects of land grabs go beyond affecting the livelihoods of people to as far as destroying their dignity, their identities, and their ancestral philosophies.

This study made a contribution to the examination the socio-economic implications of land grabbing in sub-Saharan Africa by specifically focusing on the Nilo-Saharan group called the Nuer. It contributed to the understanding of the effects of land grabs on the Nuer through going beyond simply studying the effects of land grabs on livelihoods to include how the land grabs affect the people's dignity, ancestral philosophies, and identities. From a theoretical standpoint, the study could have better be enhanced through unpacking what this means theoretically and, in the end, contribute to the theoretical debates on land grabbing in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

In addition, studying the effects of land grabbing among non-Nilo-Saharan group such as the Amhara, Oromo, Somali, and Tigrinya can be another dimension from which the issue of land grabbing can be understood. This can be done through juxtaposing the narratives of the non-Nilo-Saharan groups with those of the Nilo-Saharan groups and establish the commonalities, if any. This was beyond the scope of this study and can be seen as one of the limitations of the study. Since this study is a qualitative study, and was done among the Nuer people only, generalizing the results of the study to other locales may be difficult. Thus, given the qualitative nature of the study, the results to this study may only be peculiar to the study locale chosen for this study and among the Nuer people alone.

Given the fact that it is clear that the land grabs have had negative implications on the local people, there are various implications on various stakeholders. These stakeholders include not only the government and the new farm owners but even the local people themselves. On the part of the government, the implication of the research is that there is need to adequately take into consideration of the views and aspirations of local people before parceling out land to new owners. This approach, it can be argued, will lead to a situation whereby a common ground can be reached regarding how best the land tenure and use issues can be approached in ways that will be satisfactory to the original owners of the land.

Thus, the government needs to move away from the top-down approach it has been taking when dealing with the issue of land in the Gambella region. In this context, the implication of this study is that there is the essential need for the government to adopt a bottom-up approach in which the views of the locals drive and orient how best to deal with the land tenure and land use issues. The effectiveness of this approach is that such an approach can significantly contribute to enhancing the cooperation of the local peoples and, in the end, lessening conflicts that may ensue in instances where proper participation of the locals is not enhanced.

The participation of the local people must be enhanced, which can happen through the allocation of significant resources and ensure that the locals are at the forefront of the agricultural activities on their ancestral land. Although one can argue that it is of paramount importance to ensure that Ethiopia keeps at pace with the global trends as far as development related issues are concerned, this objective must not be achieved at the expense of the aspirations of the local peoples. Enhancing local participation in such issues through

potentially carrying out referendums whenever issues related to land tenure and use are on the table should be enhanced. Success in this regard significantly depends on the ways in which reformers incorporate the locals and their institutions in the mainstream governance structures by allocating enough resources as well as continued capacity building of local officials who are critical in the administration of justice and dispute settlement in the communities they lead.

Concluding Remarks

Land grabs among the Nuer people of Ethiopia yielded a lot of results as captured above. This paper was an inquiry into the socio-economic implications of the land grabs in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, an area that is near the Sudanese border with Ethiopia. This area was chosen because of the episodes which have taken place in this area regarding the land tenure and uses which the local peoples have termed land grabs. The occurrences of these land grabs were examined in the context of a surging literature base on such issues prompted by the 2008 food, financial, and fuel crises. Although it is too early to get the full picture of whether the changes in the land tenure and land use systems have been failures, it is a truism that land dispossessions of the people of Gambella have not yet improved the social and economic aspects of their lives. Insecurities of land tenure in the new areas in which the local peoples have been moved, poor harvests, and difficulties in adjusting to wage labour (for those who accepted jobs in the newly formed farms) are some of the challenges that the local peoples were facing during the period of the research. Efforts to ensure that their rights are taken into consideration through protesting have been faced with brute force from the federal government, a situation that has rendered these efforts fruitless.

Regarding the socio-economic implications of land grabbing on the local people in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, the study found that land grabbing leads to adverse effects on the livelihoods of the people of Gambella. Dispossessed of their ancestral land, in what the local farmers have labelled “land grabs” to pave the way for foreign investors, people in the Gambella region generally see the land leases as unjust and tantamount to breaching their rights. The local people of the Gambella region noted that land grabbing left most farmers with no land to continue farming, let alone live on. Findings showed that the dispossessions left the farmers as wage labourers on the new farms created by the foreign owners. Some are not in a position to get employment and are left susceptible to hunger and, in some extreme cases, abject poverty and destitution. Findings point to the fact that though the government saw the land transfers from the local peoples to the foreign company owners as an important way of making sure that not only people in Gambella but the whole population of Ethiopia benefits from land leases, most farmers from which the land was taken did not see this measure as helpful and of importance to their interests and needs. The land transfers from the local peoples to the foreign company owners were perceived differently by the local peoples. Given the fact that most saw the land transfers as having negative implications on their livelihoods, the perceptions of the local peoples of these transfers were mostly harmful. The local peoples saw the land dispossessions as leading to the destruction of their identities and their dignity and as being a serious threat and breach to their ancestral philosophies. Thus, studying the implications of the land grabs on the local people which goes beyond merely studying it from a livelihood standpoint. It includes how land grabbing leads to the destruction of people’s identities, their dignity, and their ancestral philosophies, which is a novel dimension which may be unique to this study.

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