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‘Being heard: local people in negotiations over large-scale land deals.

A case study from Madagascar’

SUMMARY

This thesis examines local people’s voices and influence in negotiations over large-scale land deals. Drawing on ethnographic work on a case study from southern Madagascar, it highlights the variety of agropastoralists’ responses to, and experienced outcomes of, the implementation of an agribusiness project on their land. The purpose of this research was to understand the conditions under which certain local people get heard, and others silenced, in the context of corporate land access and the processes by which some of these local voices manage to influence the terms and conditions of the deal. It looked at how horizontal and vertical power dynamics interface with situated moral economies and contentious politics to inform variations in local people’s perspectives over, engagement with and experienced outcomes of the land deal.

I argue that local voices and opportunities for influence in the context of land transactions in Madagascar are constructed at the intersection of national and village politics. I draw attention to the practices and discourses through which local state officials produce ‘powers of exclusion’ and ‘powers of compliance’ in their mediation of land deals. I show that, in socially-differentiated local populations, formal compliance with dispossession reflects processes of different natures: “compliance as acquiescence” for some, but also “constrained hope”, and potential challenging of local structures of domination or “compliance as resistance” for others. I explore the moral economies that underpin perspectives on corporate land access as well as choices to express, or suppress, subversive voices and observe a resistance, across social divides, to the “demoralising of land deals”. I show how the vulnerability of state authorities to social movements combined with competition for the resources of patronage and of authority associated with the control of corporate land access open interstices for influence. In a context of institutional bias however, only those who manage to activate key alliances with state officials and to unify village voices beyond inter and intra-class differences stand a chance of being heard.

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