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The land rush in Ethiopia – A continuing past: State-building, capitalist accumulation and political legitimacy

Moges Belay

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**The land rush in Ethiopia – A continuing past:
State-building, capitalist accumulation and political legitimacy[1]**

Moges Belay

Abstract

Land grabs are processes of control grabbing that involve the state, capital, and societal actors in multiple waves of land deals and contested, layered understanding of the meanings of land, especially in multi-ethnic societies. Yet, most studies of contemporary land grabs tend to be 'wave-specific', and thus tend to be temporally cross-sectional accounts of a single land deal case, and often taken as a plot of land spatially demarcated by the land deal contract. This approach can help us understand conjunctural explanations of particular cases, but it has limitations in understanding the logic that underpins the land rush more generally. This paper examines the land rush in Oromia region of Ethiopia with particular focus on the 2008 global land rush, using a longer and wider political economy lens that brings the analysis to the Imperial regime a hundred years ago. Historically, waves of land deals were partly facilitated or ended by dynamically changing institutions of land politics. The Ahmed government in Ethiopia came to power in 2018 partly due to political unrest over the issue of land grabbing. What changed before and after 2018 was not the central state's position on land grabbing, but only on the 'manner' on how such can be facilitated: from foreign investor dominance and a favoured ethnic group (at least that is what popular sentiments seem to suggest) to more diverse and more domestic types of land investors, and from 'only big land deals' to all sizes of deals. The transition has been navigated by the central state, which aspires to facilitate capitalist accumulation as a way to progress, while trying to maintain political legitimacy. Nevertheless, the logic that underpins the land rush is the same: expanded capital accumulation and state-building at the expense of particular types of communities, namely, poor pastoralist and peasant communities. The implications of my analysis have international resonance given the broadly similar pattern of temporal, spatial and institutional unevenness in land grab dynamics in many countries.

Keywords: land rush, land deals, Oromia region, agricultural investment, the state, capital accumulation, policy, proclamation

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1. Introduction

The land rush in Ethiopia has drawn the attention of both international and domestic media during the past 15 years or so alongside academic research interest. Yet, most studies of contemporary land grabs tend to be 'wave-specific', and thus tend to be temporally cross-sectional accounts of a single land deal case, and often taken as a plot of land spatially demarcated by the land deal contract. This approach can help us understand conjunctural explanations of particular cases, but it has limitations in understanding the logic that underpins the land rush more generally. But land grabs are processes of 'control grabbing' that involve the state, capital, and societal actors in multiple waves of land deals and contested layered understanding of the meanings of land, especially in multi-ethnic societies. It is the persistence of this logic that explains the continuation of land deals, even after the level of interest of (inter)national media and NGOs had decreased sharply. Although successive governments of Ethiopia since the Imperial era have considered large-scale commercial agriculture as a strategy for economic growth, the dominant narratives on the contemporary land rush in Ethiopia emphasize the 2007/2008 commodity price spike as the primary driver for the increased interest of foreign investors in large-scale land investments (Ali et al. 2017; Cochrane 2017). This paper delves into the temporal trends of large-scale agricultural investment in Ethiopia, and Oromia region in particular, by investigating the historical trajectory of land deals and land rushes, as well as the state-capital dynamics reflected in policy and institutional shifts that recast the roles of various entities implicated in the land rush. My argument is that the logic that underpins land grabs from the Imperial era to the current Ahmed government is the same: the state's interest in subject-making and territorialization (or state-building) that requires it to take up a role in facilitating capitalist accumulation (trying to cash in on land through a process of state-directed land commodification) while maintaining a particular level of political legitimacy.

This paper comprises a total of six sections, beginning with this introductory section which briefly discusses relevant concepts. The second and third sections traces the historical trajectory of the state's interest in and policies regarding large-scale land and agricultural investments under the imperial and Derg regimes, respectively. The fourth section examines the waves of land deals in Ethiopia and the Oromia region in particular during the previous three decades since the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991. This section analyzes institutional changes linked to the land deals that occurred at different times. Section five examines policy changes and reforms pertinent to land transfer deals and large-scale land investments after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 and founded Prosperity Party. I wrap up the paper with a conclusion section.

Land rush: historical institutional changes and continuity

> *We swim in the past as fish do in water and cannot escape from it. But our modes of living and moving in this medium require analysis and discussion.*
>
> Hobsbawm (1972)

The works by Bloch (1953) and Hobsbawm (1971, 1972) help us understand and analyse current phenomena by way of connecting to past and future contexts through exploration of historical processes. Analysis of a current phenomenon disconnected from the past can lead to incomplete or flawed conclusions due to the fact that "such ignorance of the past not only confuses contemporary science, but also confounds contemporary action" (Bloch, 1953, p. 40).

This assumption is central not only in understanding of today's land grabs, but also the role played by the state in this process because as Abrams, (1988, p. 80) reminded us an important and conceivable way to assuming the existence of the state as a given entity is "to understand it as historically constructed". In a way, the state is constituted and state-building proceeds as partly through 'land-making'; conversely, land politics is reconstituted in the context of state-building, as Sud argues (2023, p. 2). These are inseparable phenomena and political processes. In many ways, this is also similar approach to Tania Li's 'historical conjunctural analytical approach' (Li, 2014). This historical method does not de-value the current conjuncture; quite the contrary. In historical conjunctural analysis, the role of history is crucial since a conjuncture is dynamic in its nature. As Li (2014, p. 16) explained, "history is front and center because every element in a conjuncture has a history that actively shapes the present, while at every conjuncture a new history is produced, sometimes deliberately, more often as an unintended consequence of how various elements combine".

In the context of studying contemporary land rush, Edelman and Leon (2023) argued that to fully comprehend contemporary land grabs, we need to know how the past events that led to the current forms of dispossession and resistance came about. It is, therefore, crucial to look at the historical institutional shifts (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992) and political regime changes to understand the trajectory of land regime change and regime transition historically, and to see whether and how relations of power that define land access, ownership and use rights have been altered, dynamically, overtime. Edelman and colleagues (2013, p. 1521) rightly argued that, "earlier processes of political contention, longstanding patterns of land tenure and use, and pre-existing social formations" had their own contribution in the emergence of the recent land rush in particular ways. It is, therefore, essential to 'understand the present by the past' looking into the backward and forward linkage of events. Land grabbing exhibits cyclical patterns occurring as waves at different times, which are influenced by the historical context and global dynamics of capital accumulation in specific regions. Every successive cycle has had to consider and is significantly influenced by pre-existing social structures and specificities at the local and regional levels (Edelman & León, 2013). Analytically, "misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignoring the past" (Bloch, 1953, p. 43). Conversely, in exploring such a linkage, it is important to 'understand the past by the present' where we start from the current live experiences in order to develop some analytical elements which help us to restore the past and establish link with it (Bloch, 1953). In Africa, contemporary land conflicts and debate around land ownership are contingent on various historical changes related to colonization, colonial rule, and political independence (Peters, 2022) that have shaped the political and economic circumstances which determined claims over land on the basis of "competing interpretations of history, which both reflect and enrich Africans' on-going struggles to engage productively with the past and the future" (Berry, 2002). Following the colonial institutional legacies, the distinctions between race and ethnicity, rights and customs, and civil laws and customary laws are still influential in the process of restructuring the state-society relation in most of post-colonial African societies (Mamdani, 1996).

Historical institutional approach looks into the ways in which state and non-state, formal and non-formal rules and procedures emerged or disappeared all in an effort to secure consent or deploy coercion, or both, in order for the state to pursue its objectives (as explained above). It is true that separating peasants from their means of production and social reproduction had historically often been accompanied by the use of extra-economic coercion deployed by the state, not very different from Marx's account of the English enclosure during the 16th-18th centuries (Marx [1867] 1976; see also Grajales and Chauveau, 2023). But drivers of land grabbing alternately deploy the strategy of securing consent, or deploying coercion, or both, depending on circumstances that state and capital navigate in between capitalist accumulation and political legitimacy.

Land, state-society relations, and capital accumulation

Land and agriculture continue to have key role in both production and social reproduction tasks for the majority of rural households in the world today (Cousins, 2022). Regardless whether the state exercises sovereign power over the land as in Ethiopia (Rahmato, 2011), or in socialist societies like China where peasants were supposed to be guaranteed land rights (Andreas et al. 2020), or in liberal democratic societies like India (Levien, 2018) the capitalist state usually is able to find ways through a combination of 'consent and coercion' (Harvey, 2003) enable the state to take land from citizens who are usually socio-economically marginalized classes and groups of peasants and pastoralists. The capitalist state aspires to facilitate capitalist accumulation, while trying to maintain political legitimacy (O'Connor, 1973, p.3). In his argument on 'the fiscal crisis of the state', O'Connor highlights that the state needs to maintain this equilibrium for two reasons. On one hand, if the state completely ignores the need to assist the process of capital accumulation, it will become weak, and its source of power will be threatened. On the other hand, if the state uses only coercion in aiding capital accumulation by a particular class, it might lose its political legitimacy and public support (O'Connor, 1973). Such role of the state in capitalism "enables capital to insist on its right to manage the labour process, to appropriate surplus labour and to enforce contracts with other capitals" (Jessop, 2012, p. 335). This contradictory task of the state is embedded in the broad state-building and land-making agenda and processes.

In this broader context, Wolford and colleagues (2013, p. 189) argue that " the state is often invoked as a key player in land grabbing but states never operate with one voice; rather we need to unbundle the state, to see government and governance as processes, people and relationships." Several studies on the contemporary global land grab have revealed the contradictory role of the state in the process: on the one hand, acting as a broker to facilitate the land deals, and on the other hand, occasionally putting the brakes on land deals, especially when there are popular protests against them in an effort to maintain legitimacy (Levien, 2013; Makki, 2014; Moreda, 2017). Studies on land grabbing in Ethiopia have shown that the state is among the main actors involved in the process by facilitating the transfer of land to investors (Moreda & Spoor, 2015; Rahmato, 2014; Wondimu & Gebresenbet, 2018, Cotula et al., 2014).

Moreover, and specifically, the role of the state on land grabs can be seen through the four overlapping institutional dimensions of: territory/territorialization, sovereignty, authority and subjects/subject-making (Wolford et al., 2013, p. 206). Broadly defined, territoriality refers to an "attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area" (Sack, 1986, p.19). Territorial sovereignty by the state is a 'resource control strategy' by which the state controls over people and resources within a specified geographical area and defines how these resources shall be used by the people (Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995, p. 387). The narrative of state sovereignty serves as a mechanism of legitimizing the nation state's authority within its given territory (Wolford et al., 2013). Apart from the demarcation of international boundaries and building national identity, internal territorialization of the state power is a means of specifying and allocating rights to people regarding the use of resources and other related citizenship rights (Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995). As elsewhere in Africa, land in Ethiopia is also more than an economic affair and has cultural dimensions where people establish emotional attachment and sense of identity with the land they claim to own and also it is source of political power for the state (Rahmato, 2009; Lavers, 2012a; Moreda, 2015). Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic nation where each ethnic group attaches its identity to a territory of land where the current system of ethnic federalism augmented the importance of such ethnicization of land. Gender and ethnicity-based domination and exploitation are among the factors for exclusion of the majority rural people from citizenship rights including those related to access to land and other resources in rural areas (Fox, 1990).

Different actors in the host countries have different influence of power in facilitating these land deals. Among those who play significant role include “state representatives, local and regional elites, paramilitary organizations and smallholders, indigenous and marginal communities” (Wolford et al., 2013, p. 207). During the contemporary global land rush, different national and sub-national actors in Ethiopia have played significant role in creating access to land and its resources, mainly in the lowland frontiers, for both global and domestic actors (Wondimu & Gebresenbet, 2018). In Latin America and the Caribbean, Borras et al. (2012) showed that the state and its actors play various roles in identifying and providing the so called ‘marginal lands’ to investors for large scale investments. According to them the state involves in a wide range of activities that include: “(i)invention/ justification, (ii)definition, reclassification, quantification, (iii)identification, (iv)acquisition/appropriation and (v)re-allocation/disposition of these lands” (Borras et al., 2012, p. 857). The study also showed that the state used political processes of ‘technical re-mapping and land use reclassification’ which was sometimes accompanied by coercion and violence in order to realize its effort at “territorialisation, enforcement of its sovereignty and authority as well as its ardent support for private capital accumulation” (ibid). Any change in authority over land, its emergence, reproduction, or maybe erosion, most often leads to change in the nature and distribution of land rights among individual local land users and groups as well as brings some changes in other social and political outcomes (Lund & Boone, 2013).

2. State Building, Territorialism and Feudalistic Capital Accumulation (1931-1974)

It was during the Imperial era (1931-1974) that the state demonstrated its desire to modernize its state-building construction, extend the scope of its territorial claim and subject-making. These were pursued because of and through capitalist accumulation central in it was the commodification of land and labour, and building of infrastructure in the hope of having wider corners of the country penetrated by commodification. Consent and coercion, and the willingness to maintain a minimum level of political legitimacy accompanied these processes during the Imperial era.

During the Imperial era, the beginning of the commercialization of agriculture through large state and private farm production marked the beginning of capitalist production in rural areas in Ethiopia with the emergence of the rural proletariat (Markakis, 2006). The imperial regime has designed and implemented three consecutive five-year development plans, which indeed provided opportunities for the state to accumulate power and capital (Chole, 2004). In the first five-year development plan (1957–1961), infrastructure development such as transport, communication, and energy were prioritized for investment, with considerable focus on education and other service sectors. However, the importance of agriculture was generally quite low on the list of priorities, and the plan didn’t consider the need for transformation in the agriculture sector through commercialization (NEC,1957). The second five-year development plan, which ran from 1962 to 1967, was the first to show support for modernizing agriculture. The plan indicated that moving away from smallholder peasant agriculture and towards mechanization would be the main goal for the next ten years~~.~~ By acting as a center for "demonstration and dissemination" of effective farming techniques to the peasantry, modernization in agriculture was seen in this plan as a way to increase growth rates and provide a significant booster to peasant agriculture. During the designated plan period, commercial agriculture was allocated 53 percent of the overall financial investment dedicated to the agricultural sector, while peasant agriculture received a mere 10 percent of the budget (NEC,1962). Nevertheless, the agricultural sector received a lower allocation of investment compared to other main economic sectors. However, it is worth noting that the relative investment allocation to agriculture was higher in comparison to the previous plan.

The third five-year development plan (from 1968 to 1973), which was strongly supported by donors, had significantly supported commercial agriculture. Similar to previous plans, the agricultural sector was assigned the smallest amount of funding compared to other prominent sectors. However, it is noteworthy that within the agricultural sector, the share of investment was significantly skewed towards commercial farms, which received 58 percent of the total investment budget for agriculture, while the peasant sector received only 10 percent of this budget (MPD,1968). The third five-year plan outlined two primary strategies for the advancement of agriculture in Ethiopia. These initiatives encompassed the implementation of comprehensive package programs and the establishment of expansive commercial farms on a significant scale. The package program adhered to the concept of focusing on development initiatives within a particular geographic area in order to facilitate the necessary transformations in agriculture. Accordingly, the program's implementation was launched at carefully chosen sites where positive outcomes might be anticipated in a relatively brief period of time. One example of area development is the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU), which was established in 1967 in Arsi, which is currently part of the Oromia region, mainly with support from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). Its primary objective was to facilitate the provision of a comprehensive package program to around 73,000 families. This program encompassed many components, such as the distribution of fertilizers, the introduction of higher-quality seeds and feeds, the provision of enhanced farming tools, and the facilitation of access to financing and markets (Adams, 1970).

In alignment with the CADU initiative, the establishment of the Wolaita Agricultural Development Unit (WADU) was undertaken with the objective of implementing a comparable program in Wolaita. The key features of WADU encompass the peasants’ relocation program, the dissemination and implementation of yield-enhancing inputs, the supply of finance to rural farmers, and the facilitation of market links for agricultural products. Several comparable initiatives were also executed nationwide, such as the Adaa District Development Project, Tach Adyabo and Hadgiti Development Unit, Southern Regional Development Project, and Humera Agricultural Development Project. In many cases, these mechanized farms have resulted in the eviction of the tenants, which was undertaken in the absence of employment alternatives for them rather than migrating to other marginal areas or turning into an agricultural workforce employed for cheap wage labor in these commercial farms (Clapham, 1988). Farmers in Aris experienced mass eviction due to the CADU, though it was initially argued by the imperial regime and the Swedish government that the project would help local farmers by involving them in commercial agriculture. However, the main beneficiaries of the project were traders, landlords, and local chiefs, while the peasantry was forced to leave their lands. Many of these efforts, however, failed as a result of several problems, including the oppressive landlord-tenant agrarian system and the unfavorable consequences of mechanization, such as the expulsion of individuals from private farms inside the projects (Zewde, 1991).

The second component of the third five-year development plan was the development of large-scale commercial farms. The economic and political crisis of the 1950s invented the arrival of foreign investors following the emperor's non-participatory development policies but driven by external motives (Markakis and Nega, 1986). The investment space was freely open for foreign companies that had access to cheap labour with no minimum wage limit and without any contractual obligation to train the human power or customize their projects to the country's actual demand for investment (Rahmato, 2009). For example, different international companies had acquired large acres of land in the Awash Valley for export-oriented production of cotton, bananas, and sugarcane. The establishment of the Awash Valley Authority (AVA) took place in 1962 with the primary objective of overseeing and enhancing the utilization of the natural resources within the Awash Valley region. The limited familiarity of Indigenous pastoralists in the Awash Valley with farm work, coupled with their resistance to completely switch from their traditional herding practices to settled farming, compelled the programs to recruit external labor. The facilitation of large-scale migrations from densely populated highlands was made possible through the construction of road networks, the improvement of transportation facilities, and the implementation of effective malaria control measures (Kloos, 1982).

Implementation of the imperial's "Third Five Year Development Plan" led to significant changes in the country's agricultural sector, transitioning it from subsistence farming with feudalistic characteristics to a more agrarian capitalistic model. This transformation was facilitated by government subsidies provided to large-scale commercial agriculture and farm inputs. The Ethiopian government sought to attract foreign capital and expertise in order to foster the growth of plantations, animal farms, and food processing companies. This initiative aimed to create a favorable environment for the development of agrarian capitalism in the country (Stahl, 1973; Koehn, 1979). Nevertheless, the introduction of these large-scale commercial farms did not yield any substantial or enduring positive effects for peasant agriculture. The knowledge, modern equipment, and resources associated with commercial farming remained outside the reach of the neighboring peasantry. The firms operated within a completely capitalist framework, with limited provision of seasonal employment to peasants, primarily during harvest periods (Rahmato, 1984). The rise of mechanized farming actually caused challenges for peasants since it led to major alterations in both conventional agricultural practices and pastoralism (Rahmato, 1984). They resulted in the eviction, dispossession, exclusion, and exploitation of the peasantry (smallholder farmers and pastoralists) in many lowland parts of the country (Makki, 2012). The landlords were motivated to evict tenants, anticipating that modern agricultural farming would generate better income than the rent they obtained from the tenants. On such project sites, the landlords snatched land from the tenants either to farm it by themselves using agricultural technologies or to rent it to other better-off farmers or investors who were supposed to farm the land effectively and productively by applying these technologies.

The Oromo pastoralists around the Awash River were evicted due to the capitalist intrusion of the regime and foreign companies that came from countries such as the Netherlands, Israel, Italy, and India (Markakis and Nega, 1986). For example, Tendaho cotton plantations in Afar by British companies and Wenji sugar plantations in Oromia by a Dutch company displaced more than 20,000 Afar and Karayu pastoralists by occupying about 52,370 hectares of land in the 1960s (Raggasa and Korf, 2018). The Borena and Kerrayu pastoralists also became targets of expropriation and forced permanent settlement following the establishment of the national parks and commercial farms (Edjeta, 2006). The large-scale plantations by the Dutch firm Handels Vereniging Amesterdam (H.V.A.) and the Wonji Shewa and Metahara sugar plantations in the upper Awash valley have significantly affected the Kerrayu pastoralists, displacing them from their vast grazing areas (Gebre, 2009). The Metahara Sugar Plantation Scheme and Awash National Park have caused land displacement among Karrayu pastoralists, disrupting their adaptable decision-making system on flexible use of grazing area and water sources, which used to enable them to shift their pastoral way of life across ecological zones (Edjeta, 2006: 190). Eexpropriating Karrayu's grazing land along the Awash River, which reduced their grazing area by 60%, the Awash National Park and the sugar plantation development schemes occupied 75,000 hectares and 15,000 hectares of land, respectively (Gebre, 2001).

3. Derg's Land Nationalization, State Farms and Socialist Accumulation (1974–1991)

The demise of the Imperial regime and its substitution by the Derg radically changed the manner and purpose through and for which capital accumulation and political legitimacy in the context of state and state-building processes were pursued. Nevertheless, it was more or less the same agenda of constituting the state through a highly uneven state-building process through territorilization, subject-making and authority construction over time and across geographic space. Like in the Imperial era, land – as resource and territory – was central to the Derg development campaign.

After overthrowing the Imperial administration in 1974, the military-socialist administration (also known as the Derg, 1974–1991) drastically changed the direction of agriculture in favor of cooperative and state farms. The breakthrough land reform that was carried out by the Derg in the aftermath of the revolution that deposed the Imperial regime in 1974 continues to have a significant impact on agricultural production in Ethiopia. In 1975, the Derg government implemented a policy of land nationalization, which involved the seizure of land holdings over 10 hectares and the subsequent redistribution of the property to peasant farmers. The land reform dismantled the landholding aristocracy, facilitated the redistribution of usufructuary rights to smallholders, and aimed to liberate tenants from their previous constraints (PMAC, 1975).

The agricultural development units that were established in the 1960s continued to be extended throughout the Derg regime, which had severe repercussions for the peasantry and resulted in the relocation of around 4.6 million people (Ofcansky and Berry, 1993). The CADU initiative, for example, underwent an expansion at the provincial level, resulting in the establishment of the Arsi Rural Development Unit (ARDU) (Ayele, 2022). During the revolution, capitalist farms were limited, with a predominant presence of foreign firms engaged in the cultivation of sesame in Humera, as well as cotton and sugar production along the banks of the Awash River. These capitalist farms were nationalized and transformed into state farms after the revolution (Clapham, 1988). In 1979, the Ministry of State Farms Development (MSFD) was established, aiming to tackle the prevalent food scarcity through the organization of state farms dedicated to the cultivation of cereals, livestock rearing, fisheries, fruit, and vegetable production. Additionally, the ministry sought to advance agricultural practices by encouraging modern farming techniques. The state farms were responsible for producing commodities intended for both domestic consumption and exports, as well as supplying raw materials for processing industries (Mirotchie and Taylor, 1993).

A Ten-Year Perspective Plan (1984/85–1993/94) was designed with a comprehensive strategy and ambitious targets, aiming to anticipate the economic development of the nation. The aim was to enhance the agricultural sector through strategies such as the expansion of cooperative farms, the promotion of agricultural extension services, and the use of irrigated farming practices (ONCCP, 1984). The plan outlined a strategy for expanding the overall land area of the state farms from 221,000 hectares to 500,000 hectares by the conclusion of the designated plan duration (ibid.). State farms were given preferential treatment in terms of agricultural inputs, with the majority of imported fertilizers (82%), hybrid seeds (75%), and subsidized credit (over 80%) being allocated to them, thereby surpassing smallholder farms (Keller,1992). Within a year, the MSFD was able to increase the amount of land that was suitable for commercial farming production from 64,000 to 293,000 hectares (Griffen and Hay, 1985). At the outset, around 448 farms of varying sizes and a total of 131,000 hectares were brought under the management of MSFD. Towards the end of the Derg era in the year 1990, the entire land area of the state farms was around 200,000 hectares(Kelamu, 2015). These farms growing staple crops were more extensive, capital-intensive, and employed fewer people per hectare (Griffen and Hay, 1985). The implementation of large-scale state and cooperative farms was believed to have the potential to enhance productivity and stimulate wider economic development (Berhanu, 2016). However, changes in the state's land use regulations led to strong opposition from local pastoralists. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, Afar pastoralists exerted considerable pressure on state farm administration, expressing dissatisfaction with and objection to commercial farm initiatives. This resulted in damage to grown crops such as banana plantations, causing state farms to halt banana production (Hundie & Padmanabhan, 2008).

4. The contemporary land rush, political legitimacy and capital accumulation (1991-2018)

The end of the Imperia era and the Derg regime did not end the quest of the state – although substantially reconstituted from 1991 onwards – to reconstitute itself, and extend its territorial claim and the scope of its subject-making and authority construction as it proceeded, albeit with different content, agenda and goals as well as drivers and beneficiaries. Land, as resource and territory, as in previous eras, had remained central to these processes of state-building, capitalist accumulation and pursuit of political legitimacy – only that in its later years, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) accelerated the pace and intensity of land grabs., which would partly be the cause of its downfall.

4.1.The build towards the land rush (1991-2007)

In order to promote large-scale agricultural investment and create more openings for investors in the sector, there have been legal and policy modifications pertinent to land use, though land has remained under state ownership since 1975. Over the past three decades, the agricultural policy and strategies in Ethiopia have undergone a significant shift. Initially, the focus was on enhancing yield to alleviate poverty. However, there has been a subsequent change towards a market-oriented approach, with the goal of promoting agricultural commercialization and diversifying into crops of higher value. This strategic shift aims to augment income levels and enhance the livelihood of rural households. Following the ascent of the EPRDF government in 1991 and its enactment of Ethiopia's Constitution in 1995, several land use practices that were banned in the past were legalized, notably the temporary leasing of land (FDRE, 1995).

Legal and policy development and international investment agreements

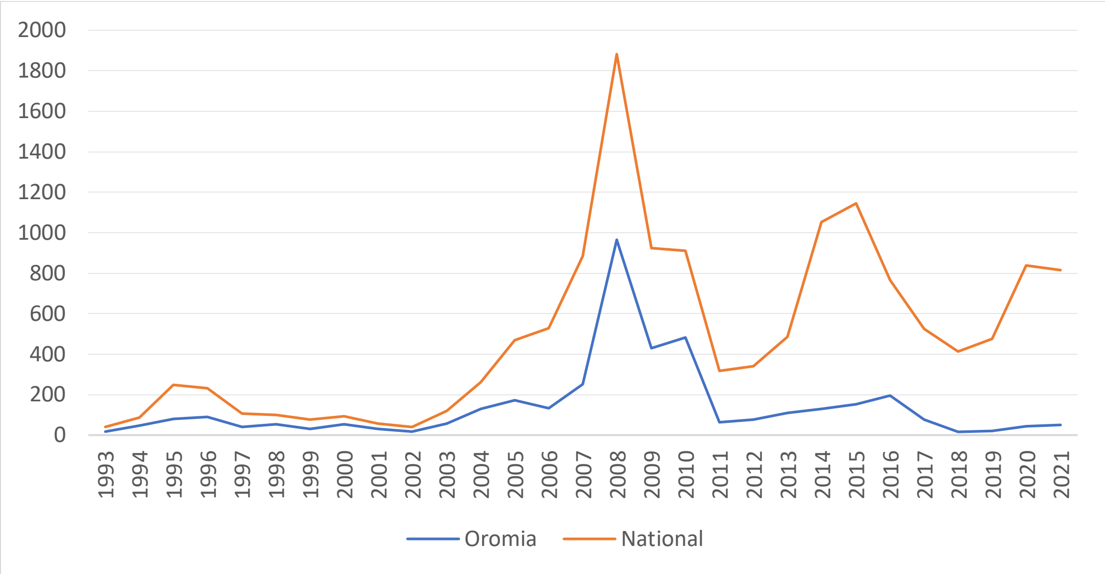
The contemporary focus on large-scale agricultural investment and commercialization by the Ethiopian government has even preceded the global factors that are often attributed to the emergence of global land and commodity rushes in 2008. In 2001 rural development policy and strategies, for example, the national government openly declared the need for agricultural commercialization through a strategic shift from small-scale farming by the peasants to large-scale investment in the sector. The institutionalization of large-scale land transfer by government policy was explicitly stated in the Rural Development Policy and Strategies of 2003 and the Plan for Accelerated and Sustainable Development to End Poverty (PASDEP1), which ran from 2005/2006 to 2009/2010 (MoFED, 2003, 2006). Such a strategic shift has been clearly outlined in the PASDEP1 document developed in 2005, where the government came up with a "massive push" approach aiming at rapid growth in agriculture through the provision of technical and financial support for smallholders to engage in market and export-oriented production and encouraging foreign and domestic private investment in commercial agriculture (MoFED, 2006).

In 2005, the government put into effect a legal change that addressed the confiscation of land for public use and included procedures for compensating people who lost their land. The proclamation gave the government the right to take land from individual smallholders within 30 to 90 days of notification. Individual land holders who lost land do not have the opportunity to resist such expropriation by the state, and their property associated with the confiscated parcel could be compensated either in cash, in kind, or both (FDRE, 2005). The government has also introduced incentive packages for investors in large-scale agriculture through legal proclamations that were published and revised at different times. These measures had their start as early as 2002, with the Investment Proclamation No. 280/2002, which provided investors with a variety of substantial incentive packages and encouraged large-scale investment in the sector.

Large-scale agricultural investments

Graph 1 shows the distribution of all currently ongoing investment projects over the years when the land transfer deals were completed. In line with these efforts by the government to attract both foreign and domestic investors, the number of investors in the Oromia region and across the country who leased land to invest in the sector started to rise in 2002/03 and reached its peak in 2008/09. This data is obtained from the database of the Ethiopian Investment Commission, which is incomplete for the list of land transfer deals that were conducted in 2021. These government initiatives, therefore, have led to a significant increase in agricultural investment, transferring large acres of land prior to the global commodity price rise (Weissleder, 2009). For example, during the early 2000s, the floriculture industry experienced a notable increase in foreign investment, resulting in the inclusion of cut flowers as a prominent export commodity in the National Bank of Ethiopia's annual report for the fiscal year 2003/2004 (Cochrane & Bekele, 2018). The EU, India, and Israel contributed over 60% of total FDI flows to the floriculture industry between 2000 and 2005. The sector has undergone exponential growth while adding considerably to foreign exchange earnings. The floriculture industry's contribution to foreign exchange earnings rose from $300,000 in 2001 to $104 million in 2006 (EHPEA, 2013). Before 2006, floriculture played a significant role in the Ethiopian economy. However, during that period, foreign investment began to diversify into various sectors such as biofuels, oilseeds, cereals, and vegetables (Dejene & Cochrane, 2021).

The total value of foreign direct investment (FDI) received by Ethiopia increased from $135 million in 2000 to $550 million in 2004 (UNCTAD, 2008). According to the then Federal Investment Bureau, foreign direct investments in the agricultural sector have risen significantly since 2005. The agricultural sector had substantial growth, mostly driven by pre-implementation investments, which exhibited a six-fold rise in comparison to these in the implementation and operation phases (Weissleder, 2009). The five countries that demonstrated significant levels of investment between the years 2000 and 2005 are the European Union, India, Israel, the United States of America, and Saudi Arabia. It appears that between 2000 and 2005, the main investment flows occurred in the floriculture sector. The EU, India, and Israel invested more than 60% of total FDI inflows in this sector (Weissleder, 2009). In addition to this sector, the USA and Saudi Arabia had high investment flows in other agricultural sectors too. The database from the bureau shows that between 2000 and 2008, the European Union invested $352 million in the horticulture sector, with 89.70% of those funds going to Oromia (ibid.). The main sub-sectors attracting FDI inflows changed somewhat after 2005. FDI inflows into floriculture remain steady, while food production and biofuel investments have increased significantly since 2006.



Graph 1: Number of land deals made over time for investments that are currently active, source: Data base of Ethiopian Investment Commission, 2022

4.2. Institutional shifts and land deals during the land rush (2008–2012)

Many of the earlier land grab research studies and media reports relate the re-emergence of the contemporary global land rush to the 2007-2008 global food crisis (Cotula, 2012; Taylor & Bending, 2009). However, it is worth noting that the phenomenon occurred not just due to the global food crisis, which is only one of the many factors and features of the global land rush. It was rather related to “the convergence of multiple crises” (Borras & Franco, 2013, p. 1739) at the global level, which was a strategic response to global crises around food, fuel, and energy – and the earlier domestic build up in Ethiopia that started way much earlier, decades earlier, but started to gain momentum from the 1990s.

As discussed above, land deals for investment purposes in Ethiopia were already going on even before the adoption of the PASDEP in 2005. Nevertheless, the magnitude of large-scale investments in Ethiopia has significantly increased since 2006, and the mad rush for land gained momentum during 2008–2009, when it occurred at an unprecedented scale and pace (Cotula et al., 2014; Rahmato, 2011; Weissleder, 2009). The preexisting commitment of the national government towards large-scale agricultural investment and commercialization, coupled with global factors, has resulted in a fierce race for land by both domestic and foreign entities (Abbink, 2011; Rahmato, 2011). The land rush in which foreign and domestic investors, government officials, and all sorts of actors joined has driven a movement that corresponds to what Tsing (2000, p. 118) called "the economy of appearances." This concept is defined by Tsing as “the self-conscious making of a spectacle [which] is a necessary aid to gathering investment funds” and speculating in advance about the potential profit from an imagined investment through conjuring “simultaneously economic performance and dramatic performance" (ibid.). The Ethiopian government has played into this concept and has been speculative on the potential benefits of large-scale land investments in transforming the country and their profitability for investors. So, the government pushed hard for large-scale land investments, supposedly to change rural areas through the transfer of technology, the creation of jobs, the creation of capital and access to markets, the production of export crops, and the improvement of industrialization through the production of agro-industrial crops like cotton and sugar (Rahmato, 2011; Teklemariam et al., 2017).

Previously, regional governments used to lease private farmland under their administration, and the federal government was mandated only to promote the expansion of such large-scale agricultural investments by privatizing state farms. However, due to the supposed regional administrative failures and fraud, the federal government adopted a decree in 2008 mandating the federal government to oversee land leases larger than 1000 hectares. Despite their constitutional right to self-determination, this disenfranchised regional states, hindering their ability to effectively administer their territory. Such power exercises by the federal government violating constitutional rights indicate an ideological change within the ruling party in the context of investment land administration (Dejene & Cochrane, 2021). Consequentially, since 2009, the government has been in charge of the leasing of commercial farmland from regional governments, requiring all regions to notify the government of any uncultivated land that could be made available for lease to private commercial farms (Lavers, 2012b). The Agricultural Investment and Land Administration Agency (AILAA) was established in 2008 (FDRE, 2010) with the aim of facilitating the lease of farmland to investors. Ethiopia's openness to foreign investors and rising global demand for farmlands have positioned the country as one of the leading agricultural investment attractions in sub-Saharan Africa (Schoeneveld, 2011).

In its first Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP1), from 2011–2015, the government was ambitious and envisioned that all the targets of the Millennium Development Goals would be met by the end of the plan period in 2015 and Ethiopia would become a "middle income" country in 2025. To contribute towards the achievement of these targets, the plan also imagined annual agricultural growth at a rate of 14.9% during the plan period and eventually doubling farm outputs in 2015 (MoFED, 2010, p. 30). Building on previous assertions made in the 2005 Plan for PASDEP, GTP1 identified the advancement of large-scale commercial agriculture as one of the priority strategic goals (MoFED, 2010). To attract investment capital, the government also considered the viability and profitability of these massive investments. It is indicated in the GTP1 document that basic infrastructural services will be made available by the government and "labour supply will be mobilized from labour surplus areas" (MoFED, 2010, p. 54). The government has also continued to enhance its previous efforts to create a favourable investment climate to attract investors by implementing civil service reforms that emphasize export-oriented commercial agriculture. These include various incentives for potential investors, such as tax reductions and complete waivers in some cases, creating access to cheap land rents and cheap loans from the Development Bank of Ethiopia, and allowing flexibility in types of production and exports (FDRE, 2007; MoFED, 2010).

To serve as a one-stop investment center, the Agricultural Investment Support Directorate (AISD) was founded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD) in 2010. The center became in charge of land identification, allocation, investment promotion, monitoring, evaluation, spillover management, and environmental and social impact assessment processes, which were previously carried out by regional and district governments, the Ethiopian Investment Agency, and the Environmental Protection Agency (Schoneveld & Shete, 2014). A federal land bank has been formed by the AISD Land Identification Group in order to facilitate more efficient consolidation and allocations of investment land. Due to the promised available resources, such as land and water resources (Makki, 2014) and the aggressive and proactive campaign of the government to attract investors by promising them attractive institutional incentives, Ethiopia has attracted foreign investors from more than 40 countries, with the majority coming from India, Saudi Arabia, Israel, China, the USA, and Germany (Teklemariam et al., 2017). At the height of the land rush in Ethiopia, or at least before 2014, it was also estimated that up to half of the total number of land deals actually involved domestic and diaspora capital (Cotula et al., 2014).

Currently, there are three distinct categories of large-scale private farms. The first are state farms that have undergone privatization and have been transferred to the private sector. The EPRDF began privatizing state farms in 1996 and, by 2016, had already leased over 26 state farms to private investors (EPA, 2018). The deputy head of the Oromia investment bureau said that some of the big flower farms are state farms that are transferred to private investors. According to him, with the largest FDI in the sector, Share Ethiopia is, for example, the nation's largest flower farm, employing 17,500 people on 500 hectares of such privatized state land. The second category is state farms, which function as parastatal corporations and are administered by the state itself. These include most of the sugarcane plantations in the country, though the government is currently looking for private investors to transfer some of them. The third category covers all other commercial farms owned by private investors that have experienced a notable increase in their numbers within the past two decades.

	Oromia		**National**	
Year contract signed	Number of signed contracts	Percent	Number of signed contracts	Percent
1993-1997	273	6.8	713	5.0
1998-2002	186	4.6	367	2.6
2003-2007	741	18.5	2261	15.9
2008-2012	2016	50.3	4375	30.7
2013-2017	660	16.5	3976	27.9
2018-2022	129	3.2	2547	17.9
Total	4005	100.0	14239	100.0

Table 1: Number of currently active investment projects that took land and signed land transfer deals at different years over the past 30 years (1993–2022), Source: Ethiopia Investment C commission, 2022.

A recent data from EIC (2022) shows the total number of all active investment projects in 2022 whose transfer deals were done in different years over the past 30 years (from 1993 to 2022), with the list for 2022 being incomplete. Table 1 shows that there are 14,239 investment projects in the agricultural sector that acquired land at different times over the years. 4,005 of these projects are found in Oromia region, which is the largest number compared to other regions in the country. The data shows that about 50% and 31% of the projects at the national and Oromia regional levels, respectively, were licensed during the land rush in 2008–2012. However, the data also reveals that land transfer deals for a significant number of projects were also concluded before the land rush, which continued later after the land rush (see Table 1).

Reports from different sources on estimates of the total size of the actual land acquired by investors vary too much, though there is a general consensus that huge areas of land have been transferred to investors during the land rush. Such reports of different time periods and disparate data sources make it difficult to put together and make sense of the exact change in the size of land transferred to investors over time. In 2009, the federal land bank accumulated land from regional governments and made it available for investors. Accordingly, Oromia transferred 1.7 million hectares of land to the bank, followed by Benshangul Gumuz (1.4 million hectares), Gambella (1.2 million hectares), and SNNP (500,000 hectares) (MOARD, 2009). Desalegn Rahmato estimates that more than one-third of the land transfers to investors in the 10-year period were given out in 2008, which was the peak time of the land rush by both domestic and foreign investors (Rahmato, 2011). Compared to other regions, Oromia region has experienced the greatest share of these recent land deals, which account for about 1,319,214 hectares of land (Mousseau & Sosnoff, 2011).

During the land rush since 2008, Indian and Saudi Arabian investors were the primary acquirers of investment land in Ethiopia. The largest source of direct foreign investment for Ethiopia is India, whose investors have acquired a total of approximately 500,000 hectares of land in 20 transactions. Domestic investors, comprising both private and government-owned enterprises, hold the second largest land lease in Ethiopia (Cochrane & Legault, 2020). For example, the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation was granted 203,300 hectares, which was about half of the total land transferred to domestic investors. Next to India, the European Union (EU) and countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were prominent foreign investors in land acquisition in Ethiopia during the rush, with the United Kingdom (UK) and Italy taking the largest share of these transferred lands (Dejene & Cochrane, 2021). While there are numerous investors from India, Al-Amoudi, the country's single largest investor and a businessman born in Ethiopia with Saudi citizenship, made nearly all of the investments from Saudi Arabia (318,204 of 323,848 ha) and the GCC (98% of GCC investments). With his two big companies (MIDROC and Saudi Star), Al-Amoudi had a total of ten land holdings in Ethiopia, making him the largest investment land holder compared to those with multiple holdings of land, none of whom had more than three (Cochrane and Amery, 2017).

During the land rush, floriculture continued to be among the key sectors for FDI inflows into the country. The export of flowers contributed 80 percent of Ethiopia's total horticultural export revenue in 2008, which was 186 million US dollars. More than 65% of Ethiopia's floriculture exports go to the Dutch market, and there are several Dutch-owned flower farms in Ethiopia. Additionally, the two countries have very strong ties in the floriculture industry, which resulted in the signing of a Horticulture Partnership Agreement between the two countries (Sisay, 2009). Floriculture investment is widely implemented in Oromia region, especially in the central highlands near the capital city, Addis Ababa, and other towns such as Adama and Bishofitu, for the benefit of the required infrastructure and proximity to the capital in order to export the flower as quickly as possible abroad, especially to the European market. As of 2008, there was a rush into the floriculture industry by foreign investors. Only in 2009, 251 investors registered to invest in the sector, of which 94% were in Oromia region (Abate, 2019). According to a report by the Oromia Investment Bureau, the production of high-value vegetables such as lettuce, eggplant, cherries, strawberries, fresh legumes, and peas has been significantly increasing as international and domestic investors expand their investments in the sector (ORS, 2015). Interviewed regarding the expanding floriculture investment in the region, the deputy head of the regional investment bureau said:

Horticulture, particularly the export of flowers, has proven to be the most profitable investment in Oromia. At the national level, there are currently roughly 68 exporters of flowers. There are 64 of them in the Oromia region. The remaining four are found in SNNP and Amhara (two exporters in each). The success of the flower industry is primarily attributable to its advantageous location. Many of these flower farms are located close to Addis Abeba and the international airport. The only faraway flower farm is "Share Ethiopia," which is located in Ziway, about 137 kilometers from Addis Ababa. The remaining are approximately 30 to 40 kilometers from the capital.

4.3. Legal changes and land deals following the land rush (2013–2017)

According to the findings of an internal inquiry by the office of the prime minister in 2013, a significant number of investors had not initiated their operations, or they were just "failed" projects. As a result, there has been a popular belief that land deals in Ethiopia were just a hype – went through boom-bust cycle, that there were many failed land deals, and that this is one reason why there has been radically much less interest from the media and NGOs. However, as argued by Borras and colleagues (Borras et al., 2022a) the magnitude and ramifications of the land rush are expected to be more extensive than previously comprehended, primarily because the prevailing technique of accounting for land deals tends to exclude the so called "failed land deals" and use incomplete definition of land grabs. The land deals that are commonly referred to have "failed" are considered unsuccessful just within the framework of the investor's stated commitment to establish agribusiness ventures (ibid). However, non-operational land deals most often lead to new land deals and dynamic changes in land control, with investors and the government controlling the land, while local people remain displaced and do not regain their lost land which is rather returned to the governments land bank waiting for other investors (Borras et al., 2022a; Broegaard et al., 2022). Therefore, non-operational land deals may also have impacts on institutions leading to "the normalization and routinization of the state discourse that lands are already decided upon to be reallocated to different uses and users other than the current uses and users" (Borras et al., 2022a, p. 10).

Such institutional shift was manifested in the efforts by the Ethiopian government when it took steps to address the flaws of these investments, which have failed to meet their intended goals. However, the goal of these measures wasn't to stop these investments from happening at all. Instead, they dealt with governance problems and were ostensibly corrective, with the goal of making these investments that took over huge lands work better. The government decided to grant these investors a period of six months to illustrate their activities. Failure to exhibit sufficient activity within this timeframe would lead to the cancellation of their contracts and the confiscation of the designated land. The government has also initiated the official termination of some leasing contracts (Cochrane & Legault, 2020). Proclamation No. 769/2012 was the first measure by the government to put new rules pertaining to foreign investment in place, thereby prohibiting foreign investors from exporting raw agricultural commodities, including but not limited to coffee, chat, oil seeds, pulses, precious minerals, and forest products. In 2013, the second significant legal revision occurred, specifically the demise of the option for extremely large leases. According to this proclamation, foreign investors will be allocated a maximum of 5000 hectares of land initially, with no further land granted until they have demonstrated achievement using this first lease effectively. Domestic investors would be given priority, with a maximum limit of 3000 hectares. Following the implementation of these legislative reforms that imposed more limitations on foreign large-scale investments in the agricultural sector, there has been a noticeable drop in the rush for such investments since 2013. In accordance with Regulation Number 283/2013, the federal government set up the Ethiopian Agricultural Investment Land Administration Agency (EALA) as a separate organization. Its goals were to manage agricultural investment lands that regional states have given to the federal government, to promote and help with the growth of agricultural investments, to make it easier for large-scale agricultural investments to produce efficiently, and to oversee the overall investment environment.

As a new area of investment, the then Ethiopian Investment Agency (EIA) came up with a document in 2012 urging investment in palm oil cultivation and making available investment land with lease prices ranging from ETB 111 (approximately US$4) to ETB 3077 (approximately US$107) per hectare. These areas include 300,000 hectares in the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples region, 100,000 hectares in Gambella, and 5,000 hectares in Oromia. Encouraging investment in this sector, the EIA also declared some incentives, such as customs and tax exemptions for two to eight years. This federal-level initiative sought to entice domestic investors, suggesting a new policy toward palm oil cultivation on the part of the government.

Region	**Land in hectare**
Oromia	1,057,866
Gambella	829,199
Benishangul-Gumuz	691,984
Afar	409,678
Amhara	420,000
SNNP	180,625
Total	3,589,678

Table 2: Investment land consolidated by the Federal Land Bank in 2019, source: MOARD, 2019

Following the conclusion of GTP1, the government came up with the next five-year development plan, aiming at boosting agricultural productivity, strengthening the industrial sector, and fostering export growth in order to lift the country’s economy to the level of a middle-income country in 2025. Large-scale agricultural investment was also given special emphasis in GTP2 (2016–2020) and continued to be considered the main source of economic growth through ensuring food security, supplying inputs to the industrial sector, and attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). Following the evaluation of the weaknesses of the implementation of GTP1, a new target was set in GTP2 to increase agricultural growth. Accordingly, "the value added of agriculture and allied activities was projected to grow at an annual average rate of 8% (crop 8.2% and livestock 8.4%) during the GTP2 period” (FDRE, 2016, p. 128). This grand five-year development plan further emphasized enhancing the private sector in agriculture, especially in the lowland areas where there is suitable land for large-scale commercial farming. It is, therefore, targeted to “transfer nearly 3.3 min [million] ha land to commercial farming investors in a transparent and accountable manner” (MoFED, 2010, p. 49).

Large-scale agricultural investment by the private sector, therefore, continued to be a key strategy for development in the GTP2 as well. The government has again set ambitious targets for transferring land to investors, adding more acres of land to what has already been identified in GTP1. Accordingly, “the total land identified for investment in the GTP2 period is estimated at 500 thousand hectares, and this increases the total land identified so far at the national level to 4.315 million hectares by 2019/20” (FDRE, 2016, p. 127). Table 2 shows consolidated land by the "land bank" from regions made available for investors only in 2019 (MOARD, 2009). An updated database for 2022 from the Ethiopian Investment Commission shows about 74% of the total 14,239 investment projects that are currently active are in the pre-implementation phase, indicating that there has been continued renewal and issuing of new investment licenses in the agricultural sector (see table 3). A senior expert in the Ethiopian Investment Commission explains that "pre-implementation investment refers to the stage in which the land transfer deal has been concluded and the company has already acquired the essential resources required for commencing operations, but operations have not yet begun."

	Oromia		National	
Investment status	Number of investment projects	Percent	Number of investment projects	Percent
Implementation	133	3.3	855	6.0
Operation	532	13.3	2873	20.2
Pre-implementation	3340	83.4	10511	73.8
Total	4005	100.0	14239	100.0

Table 3: Total number of investment projects by their current implementation status, source: EIC (2022).

Climate financing initiatives

The land grab research so far has extensively explored the socio-economic, environmental, and political consequences of largescale land transfer deals for various investment purposes. However, the impact of these investment projects on climate changes is less explored and understood. As argued by Liao and colleagues (Liao et al., 2023, p. 6) "the global land rush for agricultural production represents a significant near-future source of deforestation and associated carbon emissions". The alteration of vast expanses of land and subsequent expansion of agriculture on acquired lands pose a substantial danger of carbon emissions, particularly due to the use of fertilizers (ibid). For a better understanding of the interplay between global land rush and climate change politics, it is important to go beyond food-centered analysis of land deals looking broadly in to the concept of 'green grabbing', which is "the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends" (Fairhead et al., 2012, p. 237). This has resulted in a new form of market environmentalism which separated people from nature in the guise of addressing climate change impacts. Borras and colleagues (Borras et al., 2022b) suggested that climate change requires a comprehensive examination within its broader historical framework. Historical processes and patterns of inequitable exchange have led to today's economic and political relations that result in enclosures and extraction, particularly in the Global South, in the pretext of achieving net-zero commitments, offsetting targets, or delivering technologies for low-carbon transformations (ibid). the authors identified four competing and interconnected narratives that shape the discourse around climate change and influence its manifestation within rural contexts. These are narratives of climate emergency, climate justice, structural transformation, and corporate-driven, technological narratives these narratives also determine the dynamics of climate politics and the emergence of agrarian conflicts (see Borras et al, 2022b).

In recent years, the Ethiopian government has shown increasing interest in climate financing initiatives as a means of generating revenue for both the government and the community. As part of the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), Ethiopia is collaborating to implement Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation and the Enhancement of Forest Carbon Stocks (REDD+) program. Ethiopia's forested areas, covering over 60 million hectares, account for 50% of the country's total land area. Ethiopia's government has implemented the REDD+ Preparation Proposal (R-PP) since January 2013, implementing measures such as reinstatement of the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, revision of Forest Policy and Proclamation, and formulation of a national REDD+ Strategy and safeguards instruments (MEFCC, 2018). The REDD+ program is planned to be implemented within the framework of Ethiopia's Climate Resilience Green Economy (CRGE) Strategy (MEFCC, 2017).

The Ethiopian government embraces the global climate action strategy around the REDD+ mechanism. The government has adopted a national REDD+ program that would run for 15 years (2016–2030) (MEFCC, 2018). The REDD+ strategy is also believed to contribute to the achievement of some of the plan targets of GTP2 (2016–2020). GTP2 aimed to increase the country's forest cover from 15.5% in 2016 to 20% in 2020 (FDRE, 2016). For the presumed success of the implementation, revision and adaptation of policies, laws, and regulations are required, particularly in land use, property rights, and licensing for forest development (MEF, 2014). The CRGE strategy aims to mitigate around 320 million tons of carbon annually, potentially generating billions of dollars on a yearly basis. The strategy aims to expand 7 million hectares of forests, with the goal of GTP-2 focusing on safeguarding, rehabilitating, and promoting sustainable terrestrial ecosystem utilization through effective forest management, desertification measures, prevention of land degradation, and biodiversity failure. The document shows the availability of vast tracts of land required for the implementation of the REDD+ initiatives as follows:

> With 17.2 million hectares of forests covering 15.5% of the national territory….. and a large expanse of deforested lands, degraded forest areas, and degraded lands suitable for forest restoration, Ethiopia has a huge potential for REDD+ implementation (MEFCC, 2018, p. 16).

Due to its vast forested area of 6.5 million hectares, Oromia Regional State has been designated as the country's first pilot jurisdictional REDD+ program (MEF, 2014). The Oromia Forested Landscape Program (OFLP) is a 10-year strategic platform aimed at implementing interventions across many sectors and involving multiple partners within the region's forested landscapes. It seeks to transform forest management, reduce emissions, enhance livelihoods, lessen poverty, mitigate climate change, preserve biodiversity, and enhance water availability (ibid.). According to a senior official in the bureau of Oromia environmental protection authority's REED+ coordination unit, the implementation phase of the pilot project was started in 2017 with a focus on afforestation, reduction of deforestation, and improvement of livelihoods via participatory forest management. The interviewee added that approximately 9000 hectares of land were identified as hotspots for deforestation.

The implementation of climate change policies, such as climate-financing, carbon-offsetting, and sequestration initiatives, has a substantial impact on the social, economic, and political dynamics of rural areas, since it brings about enormous transformations in landscapes through enclosures (Borras et al., 2022b). Such changes in land use and land cover for the purpose of mitigating climate change can have comparable socioeconomic effects to traditional land or resource grabs and the transfer of large-scale land for such climate measures can result in accumulation and dispossession at the same time (Bluwstein & Cavanagh, 2023). Climate-financed Forest initiatives frequently entail the enclosure of communal resources, thereby establishing regulations about access and usage rights for specific individuals or groups. The REDD+ project in Oromia communities where it has been implemented so far has led to deprivation of grazing land, resulting in increased fodder prices, and forced farmers to sell animals and reduce cattle numbers (Kemerink-Seyoum et al., 2018). The interviewee from the bureau also confirmed that land use conflicts sometimes arise, particularly when smallholders contribute land to a project. According to him, different community members may have different interests in the use of their land, such as grazing or not. Those who contribute land individually receive shares of the benefits of the program proportional to the amount of land they provide and are not compensated for the land.

Sugar plantation expansion and privatization

The Ethiopian government has also implemented frequent reforms in the commercial sugar production sector, trying to make it more productive for both domestic consumption and export, thereby generating foreign currency. In its effort to increase commercial sugar production through implementing large-scale sugar investment projects, the government re-established the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation (ESC) in 2010 in accordance with Regulation No. 192/2010 of the Council of Ministers, substituting the previous Ethiopian Sugar Development Agency. Since the establishment of the corporation, the country has been expanding the sugar plantation development beyond Wonji Shoa, Metehara, and Fincha Sugar Factories, where it had been confined for more than 50 years. Consequently, between 2015 and 2022, several new sugar factories, including Kessem, Arjo Diddessa, Omo Kuraz Sugar Factory Two and Three, and Tana Beles, were put into operation. Accordingly, there has been a significant increase in sugarcane land coverage, which was expanded from 30,000 hectares in 2009 to 102,741 hectares in 2020. Since its establishment as a state-owned enterprise, the Corporation has been in charge of 13 sugar factories aiming at export-oriented sugar production (ESC, 2019).

Recently, the federal government, under the administration of Aby Ahmed, started privatizing 13 operational and intended sugar factories in 2018. The initiative called for the privatization of the eight already constructed plants, such as the Tana Beles and Wonji Shoa factories. However, no concession has been made yet. A very recent change in the sugar industry is the 2022 reform that led to the founding of the Ethiopian Sugar Industry Group (ESIG), which replaced the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation. This was authorized by FDRE Council of Ministers Regulation Number 500/2022. The aforementioned group has been founded with a capital of 115 billion Birr to oversee the operations of the eight sugar factories that are now being constructed as well as run the five state-owned plants, namely Wonji, Metehara, Fincha, Kesem, and Tana Beles.

5. Privatization as an engine for prosperity, recent policy changes since 2018

State-building through the pursuit of contradictory tasks of the state to facilitate capitalist accumulation and pursue political legitimacy, at least a minimum level of the latter, proceeded – with minor changes. The changes were limited to recasting the key drivers and beneficiaries of land grabs: from big foreign corporations and a particular dominant well-connected single ethnic group to more domestic, ethnically diverse investors in land, and from the formal procedures were organically adjusted to fit the change in the cast of characters. And so, land deals and land deal-making have proceeded post-2018, and there are even signs that it has started to gain greater momentum again during the past couple of years.

Since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018, many political and economic reforms have been made. The former EPRDF, which was primarily a coalition of four political parties representing the Oromo, Tigray, Amhara, and SNNP, was restructured and transformed into the Prosperity Party (PP), encompassing representatives from the two city administrations (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa) as well as all of the nation's regional states, including Somali, Afar, Gambella, Benshangul-Gumuz, and so on. The current administration implemented this reform as a means to promote inclusive political power and involvement in key decision-making processes related to socio-political affairs and national development by all nations and nationalities in the country. In 2020, the Ethiopian government set a 10-year plan for economic growth called the Homegrown Economic Reform Plan (2021–2030). This plan is meant to speed up the economic transformation of the country as a whole and fix institutional and structural problems in the agricultural sector in particular. The plan defines sector-specific approaches to liberalizing financial markets, privatizing state-owned enterprises, and investing in information technology infrastructure in order to develop a prosperous nation through establishing a feasible market-based economic system while strengthening the contribution and involvement of the private sector (PDC, 2021).

Through developing vast areas of "underutilized" arable land and enhancing technology adoption, this ten-year plan aims to boost agricultural output, export income, domestic substitutes for imported goods, and lower production costs. By creating the enabling environment, this ten-year transformation plan sets out a long-term goal of transforming Ethiopia into an "African Beacon of Prosperity" (PDC, 2021, p. 19). The initiative aims at enhancing horticulture development, increasing private investor participation, constructing institutional capacity, and creating employment opportunities, as well as transforming smallholder farmers into investors by providing them access to additional land (PDC, 2021). To achieve these objectives in the agricultural sector, the plan targets increasing crop production by medium and large-scale private farms from 4% to 16%, horticulture production from 181 million to 261 million quintals, land allocated to private investors in horticulture from 17,600 hectares to 43,000 hectares, exports of horticulture from 272,800 tons to 1.05 million tons, and foreign currency earnings from horticulture exports from USD 3 billion to USD 5 billion (ibid.).

In an effort to expand agricultural investments and attract more investors, the notion of large-scale investment has been reconsidered recently. A higher official from the Ethiopian Investment Commission indicated that land holdings of 5000 hectares are now considered large-scale agricultural investments, down from the previous threshold of 10,000 hectares and above. The ability of investors to develop land is highlighted in this update, with an emphasis on the capital required for specific investments. The interviewee added that "large-scale investment contracts were previously made by federal or regional governments, but now transfer deals can be made at the zone level." These changes are supposed to simplify the process of transferring land to investors, thereby increasing revenues from investments by both domestic and foreign investors. The 10-year economic growth underlines the government's responsibilities to support all development forces, including private investment, based on merit and achievement, not political elite proximity or influence. The plan also indicates that efforts have been made over the past two years to implement reforms aimed at rectifying previous shortcomings and avoiding favoritism towards state-owned firms and those with proximity to the political elite (PDC, 2021). In line with this, the deputy head of the Oromia investment bureau indicated that "many investors, both domestic and foreign, had ties to the previous TPLF administration and were unfairly given privileges in the form of incentives." He also added that "after the regime's overthrow, most of these investors ceased operations as they couldn't function without it."

Another recent development in Oromia region that resulted in the capture of enormous acres of land from local smallholders for investment is the establishment of the Gada Special Economic Zone (GSEZ), founded as per regional proclamation number 226/2020. According to the regional government, the goal of GSEZ is to bring about economic and social transformation by supporting favorable policies, delivering essential public goods, inviting in both foreign and domestic capital, fostering technology transfer, creating jobs, and developing multiplier effects on the economy. By establishing cost-effective integrated infrastructure and fostering a favorable investment climate, the GSEZ envisions becoming the leading zone of reform and innovation, the center of Ethiopia's economic development, and the prototype of Africa's economic hub by 2062. In his welcoming message regarding the establishment of this special economic zone, the president of Oromia regional state, Mr. Shimelis Abdisa, indicated that 24,000 hectares of land have been demarcated for the economic zone, which will consist of 13 industrial zones and a smart city aiming at boosting the national economy through FDI and domestic potential. Though it is too early to evaluate its impacts, complaints are already emerging from the local community regarding this new project. An interviewee from the office of land administration in Lumme woreda said "this 40-year project will significantly displace thousands of people in the coming years, shrinking the rural woreda as it encloses the land area of 13 kebeles, including their farm and communal grazing lands."

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued and demonstrated the centrality of state-building processes that require territorialization, subject-making and authority construction in the pursuit of capital accumulation while trying to maintain political legitimacy. When we center our analysis on this as a set of social processes and treat it as the thread, the logic, that framed and enabled land deals and land deal-making across regimes over time in Ethiopia, then it is no surprise that the post-2018 Ahmed government has pursued large-scale commodification of land as a comprehensive strategy of state-building and capital accumulation, requiring only minor changes that are about recasting the range of drivers and beneficiaries of the land commodification process and the formal procedures on how to do this.

And so, despite decreased interest from (inert)national media and NGOs in reporting land grabs, the phenomenon has continued in Ethiopia. The central state, navigating its task to facilitate capitalist accumulation while trying to maintain political legitimacy, trying to pursue and extend the frontiers of its fiercely contested, ethnic tension-filled state territorialization and subject-making agenda have retailed land grabbing as a central agenda and mechanism to pursue the interest of state and big capital. Throughout history, the central state has carried out these dual tasks by navigating a balance between consent and coercion. When we look at the current conjuncture from a longer historical lens, we see that beginning with the Imperial regime a hundred years ago, successive Ethiopian governments have promoted large-scale land investments and fostered a favorable investment climate to attract capital, including foreign investors. Although the number of land transfer deals to both foreign and domestic investors peaked in 2008, large-scale land investments made through such deals had previously been on the rise in the country as early as 2003. The pre-existing legislative framework that attracted investors, together with the surge in global commodity prices in 2007–2008, played a significant role in driving the momentum of the land rush in 2008. The Ethiopian government has been consistently implementing policy changes and revising and adopting relevant laws to optimize its financial gains from investments. In whatever arrangement and institutional setup, the interest of the state has been in maximizing benefit from the various land investment. Consequently, the state's engagement has consistently focused on governance matters, specifically aimed at facilitating land transfer deals. This has resulted in successive waves of land deals, with multiple actors playing diverse roles at different points in time.

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Author's biography

Moges Belay Bantie is a PhD researcher at Institute of International Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He is member of RRUSHES-5, a European Research Council Advanced Grant awarded project (Grant No. 834006): Commodity & Land Rushes and Regimes: Reshaping Five Spheres of Global Social Life. As part of this project, his research focuses on the dynamics of state-citizenship relations, labour/migration, and climate change politics in the era of global land and commodity rushes.

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