



Transnational Land Deals in Mindanao: Situating Ambivalent Farmer Responses in Local Politics

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Paper presented at the
International Conference on
**Global Land
Grabbing**
6-8 April 2011

Organised by the Land Deals Politics
Initiative (LDPI) in collaboration with the
Journal of Peasant Studies and hosted
by the Future Agricultures Consortium
at the Institute of Development Studies,
University of Sussex

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This article broadly discusses transnational corporate land acquisitions while focusing specifically on the politics surrounding a joint-investment in Mindanao, Philippines. More particularly it analyses the key implementation processes prior to and during the establishment of one particular joint investment in Mindanao between a Philippine company, Aztropex, and a Kingdom of Saudi Arabia company, Far Eastern Agricultural Investment Company (FEAICO). This is done by posing three main questions: (1) What are the key characteristics of Mindanao which make it a target area for foreign investments in agriculture?; (2) what areas in Mindanao are targeted, what is the local tenure system, and what will be the land ownership arrangement for the intended investment?; and (3) Where do the local farmers sit in the investment plans and what are their positions on the possible land acquisition? In short, the article will study the local politics surrounding a joint-investment by focusing on the dynamics of the involved actors and the local context, with hopes to provide a better understanding of the ambivalent responses of local communities.

Key Words: Transnational land deals, Land Grabbing, farming communities, dispossession, Philippines, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

In recent years companies and governments from around the world have shown a growing interest in the acquisition of, and/or investment in, the farm-land of the Global South. More particularly, governments and companies of wealthy yet food or fuel insecure countries have been searching for ways to address food and fuel shortages through the interlinked system of global trade. They have been looking to the areas of the Global South that are suffering from a lack of investment in their agricultural sector to access farmland through foreign direct investment. This is now a growing trend based on the divergent, yet complimentary, needs of some states to establish a steady food supply and the needs of others to develop their agricultural sector.¹ The trend goes by various terms from a “land grab,” “land acquisition,” “transnational corporate land deal,” to a “foreign investment in agriculture².”

Two nations in particular which have been working together to encourage transnational corporate land deals are the Philippines and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). With weak agricultural conditions the KSA is constantly concerned with the possibilities of a food crisis. The Philippines, on the other hand, hungers for foreign investment in their agricultural sector with the “hope”³ to address rural poverty, and therefore favours foreign inputs for agricultural production. The claimed necessities of both countries have brought the governments together to address their concerns through what they call a “collaborative effort⁴”

¹ There are many ways by which land deals are unfolding other than for food production- for example through the production of biofuels and other non-food agricultural commodities, through the development of nature reserves and eco-tourism, amongst others. However, for the purpose of this particular research the acquisition of land for food production will be discussed

² For the purpose of the article the term “transnational corporate land deal” or “land deal” will be used most frequently.

³ Quotations are used here since this “hope to address rural poverty” is rhetoric often presented by various government agencies involved in investment promotion.

⁴ The term is used by both governments, by companies and investors, to promote their plans for a joint investment.

based on rules set by the global market. This flourishing partnership has led to a transnational corporate land deal involving investors from both the KSA and the Philippines in the Mindanao region.

This article examines this specific transnational corporate land deal which is developing across various regions of Mindanao and spanning an assortment of barangays⁵. One area in Mindanao which will receive particular attention in this analysis is the ARMM. The ARMM is the poorest and the most unstable region of Mindanao and one that is receiving extra attention for this joint investment, making this area of particular importance for this study.

This analysis applies a political economy lens to the various arrangements developing around Mindanao and throughout different targeted areas of the joint investment -including but not limited to the ARMM. This is approached in three stages, first by distinguishing the tools used to support the deals, then the land relations surrounding the deals, and finally the local level responses. Although each aspect may seem distinct, in the case of this joint-investment, the tools, relations, and responses all contribute to create the picture of transnational land deals in Mindanao.

Theoretical lens and methods

The theoretical map used in this analysis is based on theories of agrarian political economy with a special focus on land issues. Within this broad field of analysis key concepts such as, agrarian politics, power, and access are contingent on class dynamics, power relations, and how each defines access. Underlying each of these issues are the social, cultural, economic, political, and ecological relations which structure the agrarian terrain and define the power relations. The local dynamics define who benefits from the deals and to what extent, how the farmers are affected by the plans, and their responses. Therefore, this lens is used to understand the “who gets what, when, and how” in regards to the Mindanao joint investment.

The findings are derived from research done in the Philippines over a two month period in 2010. The Philippines was chosen as the focus originally due to the fact that various investors have shown interest in the area yet little has actually taken place on the ground so far. This is important for this particular article as it presents the opportunity to analyse the origins of, and the initial processes involved in, the establishment of the transnational corporate land deal. The primary analysis consisted of both focus groups and key informant interviews. Four focus groups were done in total: two were with two separate farming cooperatives, one was with eight different leaders of indigenous communities in the Philippines and another was with a group of eight farming organization leaders. The groups identified for the focus groups were selected to represent various political camps, organizations, structures, and locations. The focus groups were aimed at getting the perspectives of different farmers and indigenous groups who have been a part of the land struggles and who are aware of the growing prominence of foreign investors. Both the key informant interviews and the focus groups present the relevant dynamics that define the current status of the joint investment currently occurring in various areas around Mindanao.

Limitations of the study

It is important to note here that, since this was a brief, exploratory study certain elements are missing in this analysis. As the joint investment spans various areas around Mindanao, and due to time constraints and inaccessibility to certain regions, an in depth analysis of each targeted area within this joint investment plan is missing. At the time of this research certain areas of Mindanao - Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM)⁶ in particular- had a heightened risk due to conflict and therefore certain regions, government officials, clan leaders, and community members, were inaccessible. At the same time, this study

⁵ A barangay is essentially a small community in the Philippines that is organized as an administrative division.

⁶ The ARMM is a region of Mindanao created in 1989, which distinguishes the Muslim areas of Mindanao. The ARMM is still considered an “inseparable part of the national territory” (RA9054) of the Philippines. The ARMM will be further discussed below.

was intended to be brief leaving certain relevant topics unexplored. Meaning an in depth analysis of the social dynamics of each deal in each region is missing. Certain elements which should be analysed at the local level for each targeted area of this joint investment include: community interaction, class relations and dynamics, community politics, gender and age dynamics, and inner community struggles and conflicts. Therefore, the aim of this study must be kept clear and straightforward. It does not claim to be an in depth analysis of the context of each area targeted and the exact form of land alienation taking place in each region. It does, however, present the broad politics surrounding a joint-investment plan, which includes the various dominant actors, the targeted areas, and the broad processes of land alienation currently under-way.

The Tools: Implementing Foreign Investments in Mindanao

Mindanao is one of the largest islands of the Philippines and one of the richest in natural resources (Mindanao Economic Development Council 2004). With rich soils, a tropical climate, and being typhoon free, Mindanao has one of the best growing conditions of the entire country. Mindanao is said to grow “most of the Philippines' major crops such as rubber (100% of national production), pineapple (91%), cacao (90%) as well as banana, coffee, corn and coconut (over 50%)” (Mindanao Economic Development Council 2004). The island is predominantly agricultural, in fact almost 1/3 of the land of Mindanao is devoted to farming and more than a third of the population of the island is employed in the agriculture, fishery and forestry sectors (Mindanao Economic Development Council 2004: section 3, parag. 1).

Overall, Mindanao produces over 40% of the country's food and 30% of the country's agricultural exports (Mindanao Economic Development Council 2004). A dominant form of agriculture practised is family sized farming, often organized into cooperatives. Another form is large scale plantation style farming owned by corporate entities. In many cases, the small scale farmers and cooperatives have contracts with corporate entities whereby they grow and sell there crops to the said company. This is often organized through cooperatives, but is also done individually through farming communities. Many small scale farmers have received title to land through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). CARP was established in 1988 and is the land reform policy of the Philippines. As one regional department explains, the nature of CARP is as follows:

CARP covers —all farmlands for corn and rice and other crops... the reform include and involve redistribution of land... we offer three basic services to farmers: Land tenure improvement, Support services and Delivery of Agrarian Justice through the legal frameworks. Communities acquires land through Certificate of Land Ownership... we get land from clusters of agrarian communities mostly in rural areas and some parts of urban areas marked as alienable and disposable lands. Land is also redistributed from privately owned agricultural lands. Beneficiaries are selected generally from landless people who accept to till the land and maintain it; the acreage limit given is 3 acres from the previous 7 acres. Minimum for corn land is 5 acres. CARP itself acquires land sales of privately owned lands and sometimes from voluntary transfer from well-wishers (Excerpts from a regional Officer for Comprehensive Agrarian Reform (CAR) in Dipolog City, cited in Ogalo 2010: 37).

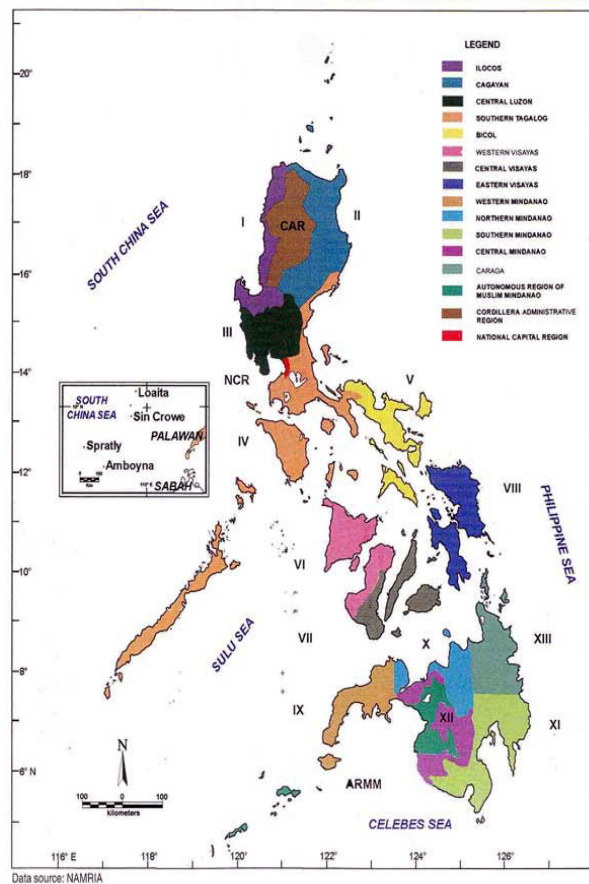
In short, the goal of the reform in the Philippines was initially to break up large farms and redistribute the land into small plots to be cultivated by landless small family farmers (Borras and Franco, 2005: 333). Essentially, the land reforms aimed to, “shape and maintain their [farmers] livelihoods, to prevent exclusion from social opportunities, to gain access to the dominant political processes, and to preserve their cultural heritage as a crucial dimension of their survival” (Borras, 2007: 1). The successes and failures of CARP will not be discussed in-depth here however, it's importance in the area must be acknowledged as many of the

areas targeted for land acquisition are Agrarian Reform Communities (ARCs)⁷.

Not every region of the Philippines was targeted, acquired, and distributed in the same manner under CARP, nor did the communities identified have the same experience⁸. Although many farmers benefited by receiving land, there have also been many struggles and conflicts with the previous land owners to actually have the land redistributed. At the same time, certain areas of Mindanao have had a very different experience with CARP, such as the ARMM. Although areas of the ARMM have been targeted CARP has not been fully implemented in the region. Without going too deep into the issue of CARP in the ARMM, it must be noted that much corruption has tainted the implementation process in the region leaving much of the land of the area still in the hands of landed elites. However, the areas that are targeted for this investment are held by Moro Clans. This will be discussed further below.

Other than the variety of experiences which define the CARP experience in Mindanao, there are also various and distinct land relations and ownership structures⁹ that characterize each area. The map below presents all the island groups in the Philippines. The most southern island is Mindanao, this map depicts the various regions and barangays of the island and the Philippines in general.

Map of the Philippines Divided by Political Regions



Source: www.mindanaomaps.com

⁷ ARCs are the communities that are made up of the land redistributed under CARP.

⁸ On an individual level, experiences were also obviously quite diverse. Especially based on gender. Essentially, men and women have very different experiences under CARP. For example, when a woman should be a beneficiary she often experiences difficulty in actually getting the land title or accessing support from the local authorities.

⁹ Ownership is used here, and throughout the rest of the article, to refer to the individual occupying the piece of land.

Mindanao is often promoted as an area of vast opportunity for development due to its resources of land, forest, and people (Mindanao Economic Development Council 2004). As stated by the Philippine government, “[i]f wisely harnessed, Mindanao's rich agricultural resources can serve as the Philippines' foundation for sustainable growth” (Mindanao Economic Development Council 2004). This possibility is currently being embraced by local and international investors, and is encouraging the increased interest of foreign investment.

While foreign investments in agriculture are continuously encouraged in Mindanao, the island continues to be plagued with issues of poverty, war, and insecurity. In the case of Mindanao each of these issues are interlinked. Regardless of the fact that Mindanao is one of the richest regions in regards to resources, it is still the poorest of the Philippines' island groups (Dearn 2009). In fact 50% live below the poverty line and all five of the regions of Mindanao are in the list of the top ten poorest regions of the country, the ARMM ranks as one of the poorest (Dearn 2009). The ARMM is also a conflict zone. A commonly held belief is that the continuation of poverty and unrest in Mindanao is connected to a long history of land conflicts between Christians, Muslims and Indigenous Peoples in the ARMM (Ogalo 2010: 21-23). Mindanao is known to be characterized by unresolved conflicts over land use and ownership rights due to an extensive history of land grabbing and struggles by various groups to gain or maintain control of land. The conflict can be traced back to the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century, however it was the arrival of the Americans in the 19th century that intensified the conflict and the religious differences (Dearn 2009). The Moros¹⁰ wanted independence, and their originally “peaceful” demands escalated into a bloody war during the Marcos¹¹ dictatorship (Dearn 2009).

Since then the war has escalated, causing a divide between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)¹² and the rest of the island. Today, the MILF is classified as a terrorist group. One of the omnipresent demands of the MILF is for a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) for ancestral domains,¹³ which would allow independent governance of the ARMM (Dearn 2009). Other than the MOA, reasons for the continuation of the conflict are: claims of suppressed Moro identity, claims of ethno-religious divides, and the clear existence of poverty (Dearn 2009).

The continuation of poverty and the conflict in Mindanao is one of the most often used arguments to attract foreign investments in agriculture into the area. In fact both local and national government bodies are taking a special role to promote Mindanao to foreign investors in order to bring economic development to the island. Local and national bodies of government identify “development” and “growth” as the path to ending the conflict (Mindanao Economic Development Council 2004). In the words of the Mindanao Economic Development Council “[e]conomic development programs should be undertaken hand in hand with programs targeted at alleviating poverty and installing conditions that would lead to long-term peace” (Mindanao Economic Development Council 2004).

As stated, the “need for peace” is one of the reasons the Philippine government is promoting Mindanao, and the ARMM in particular, as the number one place for foreign investment. Regional and national government bodies are claiming that it is not only important to bring economic development, it is vital in order to help stop the conflict (Mindanao Economic Development Council 2004). As stated by the manager of Aztropex, Mrs Sira (the local investor involved in the KSA-Philippine joint-investment), “its development and then peace. It comes naturally that way. Bring economic activity and have peace.”¹⁴

¹⁰ The Moros are the group of Muslims of the Philippines. There are ten different ethnic and indigenous groups making up the Moro population.

¹¹ Emmanuel Marcos was the longest reigning president of the Philippines and was in power from 1965 until 1986.

¹² The MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) is an Islamic military group occupying the ARMM.

¹³ “Ancestral domain” is the area classified by the government as belonging to a specific ethnic group. This is part of the ancestral domain act, which grants lands to ethnic groups who can prove to be “originally” from the area.

¹⁴ KII- First interview with manager of Aztropex, Ameerah Rose Sira on 04/08/10.

Aztropex presents this argument, in a company promotional video made for KSA investors, by explaining how other areas of the ARMM that have received investments from agri-businesses have transformed from “war-zones to eco-zones¹⁵” (Potential Agricultural Areas Mindanao 2010). They are therefore implying that the conflict areas transform to peaceful, economically viable, landscapes with the help of investments. Foreign investors are not only welcomed by local authorities and investors, but are also encouraged through various policies.

There are various examples of how policies are being used to encourage foreign investments in Mindanao. For example, on August 15, 2003, the ARMM Legislative Assembly passed a law entitled the “REZA law” (Sarmiento 2008). “The REZA law provides the legal framework and mechanism for the creation, operation, administration, and coordination of the special economic zones within the region” (Sarmiento 2008). Along with this law came fiscal and non fiscal incentives such as tax holidays, tax exemptions, waiver on wharfage fees, amongst others, for foreigners who invest in the ARMM (Sarmiento 2008). This type of economic zone was implemented as part of the “peace process” of the region and was said to be done through the intentions of the Philippines development plan of 2004-2010 (Sarmiento 2008). In other words, in order to address the poverty and conflict of the region, foreign investments have been promoted through the implementation of special economic zones of the region. The use of special economic zones is very important for the promotion of transnational land deals. In fact, in interviews with the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA), it was stated that there are plans to establish more SEZs in order to promote foreign investments in regions such as the ARMM.¹⁶

While foreign investors are invited to the region due to the need for investment, farmers are also encouraged to accept deals for the same reason. Essentially, since the region is so starved for capital, farmers have little option but to enter into agreements with investors. Along with this, farmers are more willing to enter into deals with the KSA in particular because of the idea of an “Islamic connection” and “Muslim charity.” Essentially, the Philippine and KSA governments, along with investors from both nations, are justifying such “partnerships” because of an underlying Muslim connection. The leaders of the ARMM are also claiming to be supportive of the deal because of the “religious sameness” of residents of the ARMM and the KSA. For example, Nograles, a Mindanao government representative, explains how the area is especially supportive of the KSA's investments:

the people of Muslim Mindanao have very high regard for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a purveyor of peace and development, and as host to thousands of overseas Filipino workers from the their area (Bugaoisan 2009B).¹⁷

Therefore, in short, while the ARMM is plagued by conflict and insecurity there is a joint ambition and initiative to address these issues through their similar values and hopes of peace and development. Essentially, what they are saying is, with the investment they can transform the ARMM into,

an economic zone of peace... through a joint and complimentary effort of both sides, as an effective and proven way to achieve lasting peace and progress in the region, while giving assurance that Saudi investments will be protected and highly regarded by all sectors, especially Filipino Muslims(Bugaoisan 2009B).

At the same time, since the area has been characterised by warfare and insecurity much of the area is labelled as “untapped,” with “abundant” natural resources. Essentially, since the ARMM is controlled by the

¹⁵ Clarification: by “eco-zone” they mean economic zone, not ecological zone.

¹⁶ KIIs- PEZA with Mae Celestino and Allan Barcelo on 02/08/10.

¹⁷ This idea will be further discussed in the next section.

MILF there has been little development in the area, meaning much of the resources are still open to exploitation. Due to a Memorandum of Agreement¹⁸ between the KSA and the Philippines, the KSA is actually allowed to develop agricultural land in areas that are “unproductive.” Therefore, since there is vast forestland in the area that is “untapped” there is land that is more accessible for the foreign investors. Since the ARMM has different jurisdiction than the rest of Mindanao, there are different policies that actually make it more open to investors. As stated by Ameerah Sira (the manager of Aztropex), “ [the ARMM] is autonomous, they are not bound to follow the rules and regulations of the national agencies which is why its good. It's an advantage.”¹⁹

In summary, there are several reasons and ways Mindanao, and the ARMM in particular, is being targeted for development which define the environment of investment. These reasons include, (1) the need for development due to the ongoing conflict (according the official discourse); (2) because of the conflict, local people are more willing to support the investments since they are starved for capital; (3) also due to the conflict, the area is abundant with vast resources and land since much of it is untapped; and (4) since the area is autonomous, there are some different policies making protocols which makes the area more open to external investments. In this context, there are also a few key ways the region is targeted. These include, (1) the use of discursive tools of development and peace, and development as foreign investment; and (2) the use of political tools such as, special economic zones, the MOAs between the KSA and the Philippines, and the policies of the ARMM that leave it more open to agreements. All of the reasons for the ARMM to be targeted and all of the tools used, are intertwined and feed off one another to create an implementation process based on a development discourse which paints the joint investment as an act of poverty and conflict alleviation. Each of these were and are central characteristics that define the environment of investment in Mindanao: they are reflected in the establishment, facilitation, and protection of one particular joint investment between a KSA company, FEAICO, and a Philippine company, Aztropex, which is analysed in the remainder of this paper.

The Local Land Relations Surrounding the FEAICO- Aztropex Joint Investment

The two investors involved in the joint investment are a Philippine subsidiary of a Saudi company, called Aztropex, and a Saudi Consortium formed by the KSA government, called Far Eastern Agricultural Investment Company (FEAICO). Aztropex is a Philippine company based in Mindanao that does business primarily with the KSA, while FEAICO came into being as a result of a government initiative to find sources of food production abroad. To create FEAICO the government of the KSA brought together 10 different companies from the KSA working in food production to establish business agreements with investors around the world. FEAICO is therefore the KSA body spearheading agricultural production around the world. They are a government initiative and a product of the KSA government's drive to facilitate land investments abroad.

FEAICO approached Aztropex with their ambition to produce food abroad and Aztropex responded enthusiastically by putting together promotional packages, discussing agreements with local governments, consolidating land around Mindanao²⁰, establishing food production arrangements, and inevitably creating a joint-investment with the KSA company. Here are the words of the Manager of Aztropex, Ameerah Rose

¹⁸ There are various trade agreements that help to support KSA investment in the Philippines For example, in 1999 a MoA was signed between 'the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) and the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CSCCI)... for closer economic partnership between the Philippines and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia' (Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2009: parag. 2).

¹⁹ KII- Second interview with manager of Aztropex, Ameerah Rose Sira on 25/08/10

²⁰ Consolidation” is the term used by the investors and refers to the practice of collecting various pieces of land in different regions around Mindanao. The land is organized through the local elites and/or clan leaders. This is discussed later on.

Sira, explaining how the plans originated:

[M]y assistance was requested to help their group [FEAICO], because this group is subsidized by the government. The companies in KSA are very lucky because they are subsidized by the government by 60%. So he asked for assistance with regards to land acquisition, so because I have more exposure and networks when it comes to indigenous people, and our brothers in the ARMM, he came to me...Then there was a trade mission in Saudi when the president [of the Philippines] actually met with the head of agriculture [of the KSA] and presented that there is an available of 1million hectares here in the Philippines. But there is really land available if you go back to the requirement of Saudi. We are talking of a contiguous area for plantations, not growership²¹ of farmer or farms there.

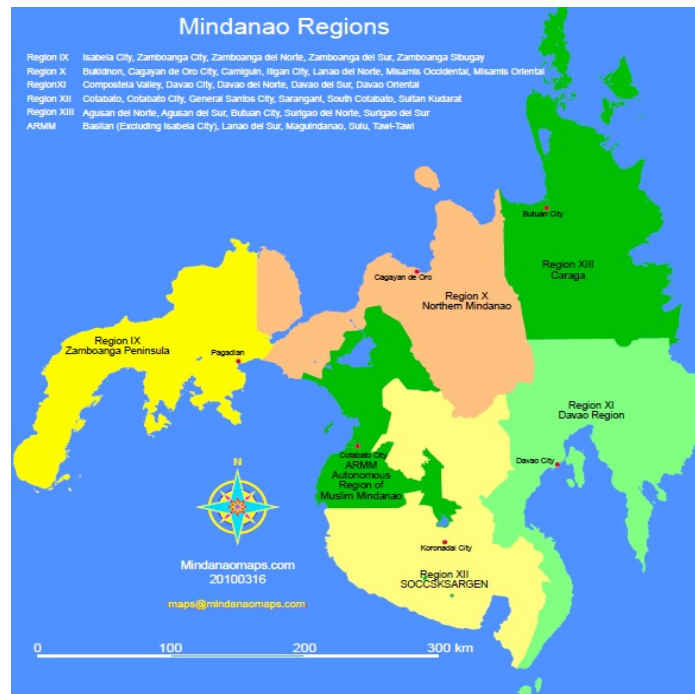
The plan that developed out of this is to establish plantations of pineapple, banana, and rice, corn, and grains²² in different areas around Mindanao. Eventually they hope to set up an agri-industry zone and an export-processing zone, with the help of the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA).²³ Mrs. □ Sira has stated that a majority of the food will be sent to the KSA, however, they may also sell some of the products locally. The proposed areas consist, so far, of up to 78,500 hectares of contiguous area around Mindanao, according to the promotional video for “Investing in Mindanao” produced by Aztropex. An assortment of areas around Mindanao make up this 78,500 hectares of potential agri-business areas. Some examples include: 10,000 hectares in the Municipality of South Upi; 4,000 hectares in the Municipality of North Upi; 4,000 hectares in the Municipality of Bagumbayan; 5,000 hectares in the Municipality of Pigkawayan, 20,000 in Bagnon, and much more. The map below presents the various regions of Mindanao. Within each of these regions is various areas of land that has been targeted to be acquired for the joint-investment.

Map Mindanao Divided by Political Regions

²¹ Growership is essentially a form of contract farming, whereby the farmers grow crops to be sold to the joint-investors only.

²² When the interview was conducted the contract was about to be signed to begin the construction of the deal. It is unknown to the researcher if the deal is developing or if it is still in the planning stage. All the details of the investment are derived from an interview and a follow-up interview with Ameerah Sira(manager of Aztropex).

²³ KII- First interview with manager of Aztropex, Ameerah Rose Sira on 04/08/10.



Source: www.mindanaomaps.com

The areas that Aztropex was able to acquire were mostly in region IX, region X, the ARMM and region XII. Each of these areas are held in various ways based on the local political situation and the land distribution of the area. Rather than going into each of these areas this article will go deeper into some of the areas that have been targeted in the ARMM more generally as a large portion of the land consolidated is in the ARMM. Within the ARMM there are various land ownership arrangements and therefore the agreements and investment plans will vary based on the area even within the ARMM.

According to Mrs. Sira, the land targeted for the joint investment in the ARMM is held by Moro clans, with each clan headed by a separate leader. These lands were traditionally communal lands and are today known as Baragays. The land is currently used for agricultural purposes and for forest products by families. According to Amira Sira each parcel of land is owned legally by a family, with an average of 5 to 10 hectares per family and held through customary tenure. In an interview with Mrs. Sira, she described the ownership of the land as legally owned by the Moro clans. Mrs. Sira explained that this is beneficial for foreign investments as it means the deal is more stable.²⁴ The planned lease arrangement will consist of each family parcel being lumped together, thus giving the leader of the entire clan control of all the land. Therefore, by consolidating the land of an entire clan they can get approximately 300 hectares (on average and depending on the size of the clan). At the same time by consolidating the land of the entire clan the investors only have to deal with the elite of the clan²⁵.

In short, the aim is to have the elite of each clan acquire the land of each family, organize it, lease it to the investors, and be the representative of the clan partaking in the plans with the investors. The remunerations for the lease under such arrangements are likely to be organized by clan leaders as the investors have said that they will only work with the heads of the clans for efficiency purposes. Once the land is leased, the plan is to hire some of the owners back to work on the land for a wage. Mrs. Sera explains

²⁴ Since the land deal is in the processing stage and literally was being established as the researcher was in Mindanao, the exact details of the ownership and amount of remuneration of all the areas Aztropex has been able to consolidate today are unknown. However, from discussions with the management of the investment, the land is claimed to be held through private ownership and organized through clans. Since the plan is in the processing stage, it is possible that agreements may change.

²⁵ All information of agreement based on both KIIs with Ameerah Rose Sira (Aztropex: 04/08/10 and 25/08/10).

that the land that will be leased is “unproductive.”²⁶ Since it is “unproductive”, due to the MOA between the KSA and the Philippines, the KSA company can produce on the land for export purposes. It is important to note here that the Philippines has various strict rules in regards to land ownership and exporting staple crops in order to protect their local food supply. Some of these rules include, the inability of foreigners to, (1) own land, (2) produce in existing agricultural lands, and (3) export more than 40% of their supply of staple crops, amongst others. However, the KSA is able to get around these laws in various ways. Most importantly, KSA companies are allowed to (1) lease land through joint investment with a Philippine company, (2) produce in “unproductive” areas of Mindanao, and (3) export crops that are similar to staple crops but targeted for the KSA market (for example producing basmati rice rather than white rice). Each of these are based on arrangements and agreements made between the two nations as part of the “trade partnership,” as discussed earlier.

The land is currently said to be a “MILF camp,” therefore the areas are under the control of the MILF. In order to “bring peace to the area” Mrs. Sira claims that they will hire some of these rebels to work the land. That being said, the leader of the MILF has actually given written consent for this investment. In a document explaining the MILF's support for the investments it was clearly presented that they are agreeing to give support due to “hopes of economic development and peace²⁷” (or they are at least explaining their support in this manner). In the words of the leader of the MILF, this investment would bring much needed development to the area and therefore, the MILF will give both physical and political support.²⁸ At the same time, the leader of the MILF stated that they are not only supporting the plans because of the development it could bring, but also because it is coming from their “Muslim brothers²⁹.” This is important since the root of their struggles in the ARMM is described by the MILF as a religious war and therefore, since the investor is Muslim they can justify their support. Along with this the KSA is using this Muslim discourse as a tool to present this investment as Muslim charity. Thus, their “religious sameness” is used both for the MILF and the KSA to justify the investment.

As mentioned, Mindanao itself is divided into various regions, characterized by various ethnic groups, and organized into various political systems. Each region is different with different government bodies and social structures. This joint investment provides an example of how much local political structures will impact the joint investment schemes. In the FEAIICO-Aztropex joint investment it is possible to see how, in one area alone various parcels of land are targeted and how, due to local political systems and ethnic differences, the arrangements will differ as well as the place of the farmers and their communities. In the case of the ARMM there are also various ethnicities, community structures, and political entities, and therefore plans will also change even within the ARMM itself. In short, the exact dynamics which will surround each acquisition will vary based on the agreements made between Aztropex and the local community as well as the distinct local politics. At the same time, the arrangement will also be derived based on the local social structure, the bargaining power of the communities, the local power dynamics, the position of the farmer and their perspectives, the levels of necessity, and much more. Correspondingly, the perspectives and responses of individual farmers and farming communities will also be heterogeneous.

The Responses and Local Agents

The farmers in the ARMM are viewed by the investors as one of the various “ample” resources in the region and described as one of the reasons foreign investors should be drawn to the area (Potential Agricultural Areas Mindanao 2010). That being said, the farmers also have a very specific role to play in the

²⁶ Even though it is described as “unproductive” it is still land being utilised by communities. Either for forest products, for small scale agriculture, or possible grazing of animals, amongst other possibilities.

²⁷ The author of this study has actual documented proof of the support of the leader of MILF, which can not be disclosed for confidentiality purposes.

²⁸ Based on confidential material.

²⁹ Based on a confidential material.

joint investment. Essentially, the investors are able to describe the benefits of the deal by saying they will “develop” the land and bring “peace” and “security” to the region. This is furthered with the promise of the MILF leader to support the deal as it is considered “Muslim charity,” which brings “economic well-being” and peace to the communities.

As stated throughout, the exact position of the targeted communities will deviate based on the region and the arrangement. That being said, in the case of the ARMM a clear image has been presented by Mrs. Sira that the hope would be for the farmers to lease their land to Aztropex through each clan leader and then some of the farmers to be hired back to work on the land. Exact numbers of how many family members would be hired will vary, however Mrs. Sira explained that they aim to hire one family member to work every one hectare of land.

While farmers will be encouraged to lease their land and become hired labourers, their actual role in the entire decision making process is still unknown. At the time of fieldwork it remained to be seen how much the farmers were actually a part of the decision making process. In an interview with the Philippine investor it was clearly stated that the leaders of the clans would be the ones who would control the land, organize it, and lease it to the investors. This raises concerns of where the less powerful members of the communities will stand in the deals, how much their voices will actually be heard throughout the process, and, their level of acceptance to lease their land. Accordingly, since it is a conflict zone and under different jurisdiction there won't be much monitoring from the government or from NGOs since many of these areas are difficult to reach.

At the time of research, perspectives of the peasantry were clearly forming.³⁰ Before discussing the perspectives of the different farming communities, it is important to first acknowledge that a farming community is not a monolithic entity. Rather they are made up of age variations, class differences, and gender imbalances, making communities often the sight of struggle. As there is power, politics and class struggles within farming communities, they must be understood as political spaces also. It is important to distinguish the composition of communities as it depicts how some may be under-represented while others are over-represented in the land deal. Especially in the cases of the ARMM where clan leaders are granted heightened authority through the contracts of the joint investment. In short, generalizations about the “farmer's opinion” should be avoided, however representations of the opinions of some farmers and some communities is valuable to get a general idea of where farmers currently sit in discussions surrounding the joint investment.

That being said, an assortment of farmer groups from the area were interviewed which presented the developing concerns and perspectives of various communities. Currently, there exists different approaches of farmer groups and farming communities to this joint investment and transnational land deals in general. A variety of opinions and perspectives of the Philippine farmers which were present at the time of this research, are outlined in the chart below ³¹:

Farmers' Views of Transnational Corporate Land Deals

Organisation	Type & Focus	Excerpts from Interviews	Key Message of informant
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³⁰ Several barriers developed during the research process which limited the ability to distinguish the exact role of the farmers in the future investment plan. To be specific, there were two key barriers: first, the researcher was unable to visit some areas due to heightened conflict threats and therefore not all communities are represented; and secondly, since the investment was at the initial planning stages at the time of the interviews it is difficult to say exactly what the position of the farmers in the areas truly will be.

³¹ Information based on two key informant interviews (KII) and three focus groups (FG): 1) KII- Farmers Network TFM, with Executive Direction Alfrelando Nayal on 26/07/10; 2) KII- Farmer coop MEARBAL, with Malaya Dionisio 27/07/10; 3) FG- Farmer coop KPM-NMKL, with Floriata Ceiya, on 06/08/10; 4) FG- Farmers coop MAPALAD MPC, with Peter Tuminiay, on 06/08/10; 5) FG- Farmers coop United Farmers in Hacienda Yulo, Eric Laurel, on 04/08/10.

TFM	Federation of farmers focused on issues related to CARP	“I would not be the one to discourage these investors, they can also bring development to the communities. What I’m pointing out only is the need for development that is fair enough for the community, not development only for the big people or for the investors or for the government officials up there while the people are suffering.”	Investments are needed in the area, but it should be done in a way that takes the needs of small scale farmers into account.
MEARBAI	Network of farm workers focused on issues related to CARP	“Maybe there are benefits that Filipinos could have from foreign investments but I think only if the government has proper policy.”	Foreign investments can be beneficial if government policy monitors the operations.
KPM-NMKL	Network of indigenous women farmers	“The global land grabbing phenomenon is actually not a new phenomenon at all, it has been happening for hundreds of years... they are not using arms any more, they are not practically invading the Philippines, but in effect they are invading the Philippines. I think the global land grabbing phenomenon has been happening for many years and is making Filipinos poorer and poorer. I think it is also the same situation that will make the poor Filipino to be socially aware so that later on they will assert their rights.”	IPs have experienced land grabbing for generations. Only now it is a subtle form of acquisition. This subtlety is adding to poverty in the countryside, yet will encourage farmers to mobilize.
MAPALAD MPC	Network of indigenous farmers	“The companies would say that they will provide jobs... What can the IPs and farmers do? We are not engineers or professionals. We will end up only as labourers. On 1.5 hectares there is only one person who gains [from these arrangements] but if you distribute it [the land], the family: the father, mother, brothers even relatives will contribute to developing the land. If you let companies, only one person will benefit. So what is the purpose? Where is the employment?”	Land acquisitions cant actually benefit small scale farmers since they will only be hired as labourers. It is more beneficial to keep land in the hands of the family.
United Farmers in Hacienda Yulo	Farm coop. A member of the national “communist” farmer's network KMP	“Essentially, in order for the farmers or for the Philippines to develop the agriculture, it has to break this land monopoly. The foreign land grab actually adds to the problem of landlessness in such a way that it reinforces monopoly over the land... It is the landlord and the foreign investors that convince the government, they take advantage of the fruit of the land.”	Land grabs are initiated through a system which monopolizes land and is controlled by elites and supported by the government. Farmers are disempowered through this process.

Source: Fieldwork 2010

The variety of perspectives presented briefly above, underlines the fact that farming communities are not monolithic but an heterogeneous mixture of different beliefs, values, concerns, interests, and ideologies. Within the peasantry are class relations and power dynamics and, at the same time, different levels of acceptance of foreign investments and different levels of cooperation with the government and investors. Consequently then, there are various views and varied responses to transnational land deals, which inevitably influence how the farmers may be affected by the deals and the way farmers are approaching them based on various circumstances and beliefs. However, one reason for acceptance that was given by the farmers interviewed is because of the persistence of poverty. After decades of neglect and the failure to develop rural infrastructure, facilities, and employment opportunities, peasants are in a place where they have little option but to lease their land and to take up employment from the foreign investors or local investors. An example of this is given in the words of Aison Garcia of the NGO SALIGON,

...once a farmer is given land they should be given support services... If you give them land and break the umbilical cord between the landlord and the farmers then you have to provide the support that he used to have from the landlord. So that’s the government’s function, and governments most of the time fail to do that so the farmers leave the land or sell the land back

to the landowner. They [the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR)] are saying ‘it’s better for us to go back to your landlords, you get to eat three times a day and you don’t need to worry about capital, you don’t need to worry about marketing’, but that’s wrong because when agrarian reform is correctly implemented it works.³²

Here you can see a perspective which is commonly given that, due to government neglect, farmers are being forced to look elsewhere in order to maintain their farm. This is leading to farmers and NGOs to become more open to entering into agreements as it could provide a steady way of life and wage. As stated in an interview with a member of the farming cooperative MEARBAI, Malaya Dionisio,

More farmers now are relying on foreign investments. There are government financial support programs but it is not easy to avail them. While in the case of some foreigners, they will just come and propose investments and then give us capital. It is easier to avail foreign finances than the government’s support.³³

At the same time some see this idea as simply a tool of legitimisation. Take the words of Aison Garcia:

I think they’re [the government] saying that [the land deals can bring development] because of the mere fact that they wanted to earn, so they’re trying to legitimize it, or give some reasons for them to continue earning. Well, we can have investors but the key here is the farmers should have a say on how the land should be used. And not take ownership and control away from them. That’s the essence of agrarian reform. And that’s diminished through these arrangements of local or foreign investors, it takes away the rights of farmers³⁴.

Some NGOs, like SALIGON, do not view all foreign investments as a bad thing. However, as Aison says, they become dangerous when the arrangement disempowers the farmers. Therefore, there is also the possibility for land deals to represent a threat. Aison Garcia continues,

It [land deals] reverses agrarian reform. So while we are advocating for the implementation of agrarian reform here comes investors consolidating land and doing mono-cropping and other growing schemes like that. It reverses agrarian reform.

It reverses because it tries to get control away from farmers and the modes of production is taken away from them. And, like, in agrarian reform, we say that we give you land, at same time they control how to use this land. Usually when farmers are given that control and ownership they tend to do sustainable farming and farming that is for food production. That is the biggest trend. Now because you let investors, foreign investors, decide on how to control production and means of production and capital, it’s like going back to pre-agrarian reform. Now you just change the landowners to investors and it’s going against the policy of agrarian reform.³⁵

Some NGOs and farming communities are concerned that transnational land acquisitions may influence the CARP process. The concern is essentially that lands targeted under CARP will be future sites of acquisition which will reverse age-old struggles to attain the land. Of course, some of the lands which were mentioned

³² KII- NGO SALIGON, with Aison Garcia, on 02/08/10 in Mindanao.

³³ KII- Farmer coop MEARBAI, with Malaya Dionisio, on 27/07/10 in Mindanao.

³⁴ KII- NGO SALIGON, with Aison Garcia, on 02/08/10 in Mindanao.

³⁵ KII- NGO SALIGON, with Aison Garcia, on 02/08/10 in Mindanao.

by Mrs Sira as sites for acquisition, are lands that were redistributed under CARP. Bobot Nerva of CARRD holds the idea that foreign investment can be a concern for CARP beneficiaries however only if it is done 'irresponsibly'³⁶:

We've been pushing for agrarian reform for more than two decades now and it has been a very difficult struggle for us and also for the farmers. We had some success in obtaining the land, having it transferred to the farmers and then making the farmers increase the productivity of the land by their own, and then organize into cooperatives... It's been a long process, and a difficult one... But with this new trend of land grabbing things could change. Some of them are good enough for the country but there are some foreign investment that are abuse. I think with that [the abusive agreements] it's really going back, it's a downgrade from what we have done. Hopefully it will not be brought back to what we had before [the land was redistributed].

Other farmers show a very strong opposition to transnational land deals. For example in another interview with Eric Laurel, of the farming coop Hacienda Yola of Laguna, the following was said,

The land grabbing is inhuman and anti people because it is the interest of the foreign people that are being advanced by the government instead of the interest of the farmers... they also destroyed the environment of the Philippines through land use conversion... The people, instead of being supported by the government are the ones suppressed by the government, from their ranks they are being discontented that the government does nothing about foreign ownership of land³⁷.

In an interview with Narciso Jover of TRICOM the concern of the impact of foreign investments for indigenous groups was also raised:

There is a threat to the rights of our IPs and towards the environment. Because if our government will tolerate companies to use our land and even our natural resources, the vulnerable groups like the IPs will, in the end, lose their land, our natural resources will be extracted, this can be one of the future causes of conflict in communities.

It is clear that there are diverging views of land deals from various farmer groups and individual farmers. While some farmers are all together against land acquisitions, and think land should be in the hands of the local communities, others may accept investments in their area because of the possibilities for economic growth, employment, infrastructural development and technological transfer. One of the biggest concerns is the possibility of disempowerment through the deepening of capitalist relations and limiting the farmer's access to land. This is seen in the way farmers with access to land will have to lease or sell their land due to limited options. Once farmers have sold or leased their land they themselves are transformed from owners of land to owners of labour and through the process can be disenfranchised. If these processes continue, a large scale transformation will occur. However, when looking to the countryside of the Philippines and speaking with the farmers it is clear that many communities are standing up against the trend and rejecting the processes being imposed upon them.

Many farmers define their lives based on having access to land. They do this in several ways: by supporting themselves and their families through access to their own land; by tracing the roots of their family through a parcel of land; by defining their identity based on the relations which surround land; and much more. This can be seen in various farmers' views of the CARP struggle as worthwhile due to the transformations that followed once they acquired land. Even if farmers find themselves struggling due to the

³⁶ KII- NGO CARRD, with Bobot Nerva, on 02/08/10 in Mindanao.

³⁷ FG with KMP network on 04/08/10 in Manila- Eric Laurel member of Farming group Hacienda Yola of Laguna.

lack of capital in agriculture, many explain that acquiring land from CARP has been very valuable due to the independence achieved by having their own piece of land. Take the words of Malaya Dionisio, a member of the MEARBAL cooperative:

Escaping from the previous landowner/business partner was very beneficial, it brought a lot of changes in terms of our way of life.³⁸

Or take the words of Nisa Radores of the CARP beneficiaries and coop CD HARBMC0,

But the best thing that happened to us, before we were only plain workers, but now we are the owners... (T)here are many changes. We felt freedom in terms of our working conditions. Our skills were enhanced, we can think more, we can make visions for our farm, unlike before that we had limited choices³⁹.

Overall, possessing land is not just about being able to produce independently, but the status, the freedom and the livelihood that goes with it. This can be seen in the way many farmers define their lives based on having access to land. For example, throughout the field research, a question was posed to all of the farmers as to why they feel land is the heart of so many disputes for their community and why they are concerned with maintaining access to land. Here are some of their voices⁴⁰:

Jonathan: Land for us as farmers is life. The life of farmers relies on the land. We are not professionals, we are not employees. We rely on the land for our daily consumption, education, health and other needs from the land and it is very important for us.

Hilda: Land is very important. When God made the earth, he created land and then the people. We have been created after as stewards of the land. Land is interconnected to our life.

Noland: Land is our life, life is our land. Nothing in this world does not depend on land. Clothes even. Without land we have no life.

Flor: As for me. Land is very important because since time immemorial even the old fathers, grandfathers they have been living on this land. Land is life because all of your needs come from land that is why we, until now, struggle with the land.

Laurencio: For me, all things that live on earth will go down to land. All of the source is from land, all of our meaning comes of land. If there is no land, there is no life.⁴¹

Above are just few of the voices of the many individuals interviewed, however the themes remained similar throughout many of the interviews. For many of the farmers, the worth of land is based on the power it bestows on them and the ability it gives them to lead a self-sustaining life, connected to their roots. Land for many farmers is form of identity and self-recognition, and most importantly "land is life." In

³⁸ KII- Farmer coop MEARBAL, with Malaya Dionisio, on 27/07/10 in Mindanao

³⁹ FG with CD HARBMC0 on 27/07/10- Nisa Radore Secretary of coop

⁴⁰ FG with PAKISAMA network on 06/08/10 in Mindanao: 1) Jonathan Balume (founding chairman of KOROFAL), from Koronadal, South Cotabato; 2) Hilda Sanahan (Committee Chair in the cooperative PALAMBO), from San Vicente, Sumilao, Bukidnon; 3) Noland Peñas of Panaw Sumilao MPC, from Bukidnon; 4) Flor Caya (Village Councilor of KPMD), from Monkayo, Compostela Valley

⁴¹ FG with PAKISAMA network on 06/08/10: Laurencio Igen of SAMATIKU Municipal Tribal Chieftain from Banga, South Cotabato

essence, this strategy which is being claimed to alleviate poverty is considered by many farmers as a threat. A threat to the autonomy that comes with owning land, and a threat to transform farmers from owners of land to owners of labour.

As stated throughout, farming communities are not monolithic and therefore responses are, and will continue to be, divided. This means, while some groups will remain silent or complacent, others will contest these deals if they develop around their communities or if they feel threatened by transnational corporate land deals in the Philippines in general. Many farmers are rejecting the deals and the processes being imposed on them, such as farmers belonging to the PAKISAMA network and the KMP network. Some farming groups attach the poverty in the countryside to practices of wide scale farming and the domination of farmland by the elite, for example as Willie Marbella of KMP put it,

Land should be owned by majority of the Filipino people and not by only a few rich people. To add to that, access to land is very important for the millions of Filipino farmers because it is actually the monopoly of land and capital dependency the root causes of poverty in the Philippines. Land monopoly is the root cause of the Filipino wide-skewed disproportionate poverty.⁴²

At the same time, others reject the notion that these investments will benefit their communities and base this concern on their previous experiences with plantation owners and foreign investors. In the words of Noland, a member of the PAKISAMA network,

The plantations are here in the provinces, so where is the income? Where is the equal sharing of the income? ...with that arrangement it[plantation sized farming] will not benefit us especially IPs[indigenous peoples], farmers and rural women. Because what we want is food security and the security of food is through peaceful tenurial settlement of our land, with no development aggression.⁴³

Some feel the pressure of the large scale farming systems as they are forced out of small-scale farming by various means. Noland continues,

Because for example, in my two hectares of land we won't allow it [the leasing of land to plantations], but it is surrounded by banana plantations. We have nothing to do because the toxic and chemicals will go to our farms. The strategic positioning of the companies is to surround most of the farmers who do not want to lease and it will eventually be forced to rent their land to companies because the farmers could not stop contamination. We won't allow that.⁴⁴

Many farmers are aware and concerned with what is going on around them, the oncoming pressures, and the uncertainty of their future. At the same time however, many communities and civil society groups are not willing to let this trend happen too easily. Many farming groups are contesting these processes in various ways, through various forms of education, mobilization, by rejecting mechanised agriculture through organic and traditional forms of agriculture, through lobbying, and through linking to international networks of mobilization.⁴⁵ This is an important aspect of the local dynamics of the particular joint investment as it represents the responses of farmers as a possible friction to the investors and government's plans. This is reflected in the words of Nestor Villanueva of Hacienda Yulo, as he describes his view of the strengthening, rather than weakening, of farming organizations:

⁴² FG with KMP network on 04/08/10: Willie Marbella of Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas.

⁴³ FG with PAKISAMA network on 06/08/10 in Mindanao: Noland Peñas of Panaw Sumilao MPC, from Bukidnon.

⁴⁴ FG with PAKISAMA network on 06/08/10 in Mindanao: Noland Peñas of Panaw Sumilao MPC, from Bukidnon.

⁴⁵ Examples given in interviews.

The struggle that we are waging is not weakening instead its getting stronger and stronger like the wind. The wind from time to time could be blowing strong, sometimes not really strong. The government is actually becoming part of the struggle that is going strong, because the more that the government is converting the land, the more it is suppressing the people, the stronger the struggle becomes. Through collective effort, we strongly believe that eventually we will gain victory.⁴⁶

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to examine a particular land deal process under way in Mindanao by presenting the local dynamics and politics surrounding this deal. This was done by first discussing why Mindanao has been targeted for investment, followed by analysing the target areas of Mindanao and the proposed arrangements for each target area in the FEAICO-Aztropex joint-investment, and finally by discussing the positions of the local farmers in these targeted areas and the local responses to the future plans.

Mindanao is being targeted based on its “ample resources” and need for economic development. The land to be acquired spreads across the island through various regions and spanning a variety of communities. Depending on where this land is acquired, the arrangement will develop accordingly, based on political structure, ethnic groups present, social systems, etc. One area which is attracting a lot of attention is the ARMM. The plans developing in the ARMM are important because of the reason and the way the investors are establishing the deals: through elites and the area's clan system, and at the same time, because of the diverse way that farmers are responding across regions, and within barangays.

As stated, local responses are divided between acceptance and rejection. What is being presented by various farming groups is that, in many cases the farming communities who accept do so out of hopes of a better future while the farmers who reject do so out of fear for their future and the fear of losing the autonomy that is attached to owning land. Different perspectives and approaches to the deals will continue to develop not only between communities but also within communities: between elites who aim to profit in the deals or secure a job, those who are sceptical about their future position in these deals, between men and women farmers, and between older and younger generations. Each group and individual is acting with the hopes to ensure their own stability and self-sufficiency. While those who accept believe stability can possibly be achieved if they can establish a steady flow of capital through leasing or selling their land to investors, others believe entering into agreements would eventually disempower them by taking away their main form of livelihood and tool of self-recognition, their land. In short, local community and individual responses are ambivalent and so are their futures.

The local politics of the farmers and their communities displays the dichotomies that may cause tensions amongst and within communities, cooperatives, and networks. The joint investment in Mindanao clearly displays the complexity which surrounds transnational corporate land deals and how the dynamics of this complexity influences the way various actors and their interactions define the contexts of each deal. The processes which will follow the implementation of each of the arrangements around Mindanao will find root in the island's complex history defined by years of conflict over access to land. Whether, how, and to what extent, this conflict over access to land will be intensified is decided by the local politics of each region targeted and the actors who have found themselves in the gaze of this investment. The ambivalence characterizing the responses of the farmers and their communities underscores the complexity of the land deal trend in Mindanao and overall, while also emphasizing the uncertainty by which the local actors involved in transnational corporate land deals are currently faced with.

⁴⁶ FG with KMP network on 04/08/10: Coop member and activist Nestor Villanueva of Hacienda Yulo

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