



## Postponed Local Concerns?

*Implications of Land Acquisitions for Indigenous Local Communities in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State, Ethiopia.*

Tsegaye Moreda

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# **Postponed Local Concerns? Implications of Land Acquisitions for Indigenous Local Communities in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State, Ethiopia.**

by Tsegaye Moreda

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## Abstract

Within Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, a substantial amount of land has been transferred to domestic and foreign investors by both regional and federal governments over the last few years. The land transfer process underway in the region based neither on the mapping of existing land uses nor on genuine participation of local communities and authorities has been resulting simultaneously not only in the dispossession and displacement of communities from their villages and cultivated lands, but also the destruction of the natural environment that sustained ecological services and local livelihoods. Particularly, Gumuz ethnic groups who depend on customary forms of land access and control as well as whose livelihoods based heavily on access to natural resources are being differentially affected. Despite the claims that the land investments bring social, economic, and environmental benefits to local communities, these anticipated benefits have hardly occurred so far and are unlikely to happen at least in the short run. What appears certain is that apparent threats have been posed to their economic, cultural, and ecological survival. The threats are resulting from the exercise of hegemonic power by federal and regional governments over the allocation of land in the interest of commercial investments at the expense of local land-based social relations and practices. Emphasizing the power relations between local communities, local, regional and federal governments (and investors), this study examines the contradictions of the land investment process and its impacts on local communities through a case study in three administrative districts in Benishangul-Gumuz region. The paper places particular concern on contests over land and authority and how this is played out in a federal context in which authority can be redefined over some key areas as observed in recent land deals.

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## Acronyms

ADLI	Agricultural Development Led Industrialization
AISD	Agricultural Investment Support Directorate
BoA	Bureau of Agriculture
BoEPLAU	Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use
BoFED	Bureau of Finance and Economic Development
CSA	Central Statistical Agency
DFID	Department for International Development
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
GPS	Global Positioning System
GTP	Growth and Transformation Plan
HLPE	High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
Masl	Meter Above Sea Level
MoARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MoFA	Ministry of Federal Affairs
MoFED	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PASDEP	Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Program
RAI	Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment
SDPRP	Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
USD	United States Dollar

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## 1 Introduction

A big-push for the acquisition of arable productive land has been underway in many African and other developing countries, particularly since the second half of the 2000s. Although the land question has always been central to the livelihoods of millions of smallholders, the issue has gained particular momentum today due to the on-going heightened and fierce competition for this critical resource involving a wide-range of actors. Such scramble for prime agricultural land has been finely tuned by a multitude of interconnected and mutually reinforcing factors and processes occurring at a global scale. The major factors include high population growth, high food and fuel prices, high demand for biofuels and animal feeds, growing demand for minerals, the impacts of climate change, the expansion of trade regimes and the emergence of consumer- and corporate-driven food systems (IFAD 2008: 4, Borras and Franco 2012).

Particularly, the global food price crisis that occurred in 2007-08, even as recently as 2010, had greatly affected the poor where the combined effect of the crisis may have added tens of millions of people to the hungry people worldwide (Christiaensen et al. 2010, IFAD 2010, Wiggins et al. 2010). These crises have complicated further the food insecurity situation of many vulnerable countries, on the one hand, and capital-rich countries that hitherto had depended on global food markets, on the other. This in turn had reinforced a global focus towards the agricultural sector in general and the acquisition of large tracts of farmland in particular. As a result, several private and sovereign investors from a range of countries in the Gulf, Asia and Europe have been involved in large-scale land acquisitions in sub-Saharan Africa and former Soviet countries to cultivate food crops and biofuels for the export market (Castel and Kamara 2009, Cotula et al. 2011, Cotula et al. 2009, FAO 2010a, Visser and Spoor 2011).

In most cases, African governments have welcomed such “large-scale land investments,” considering it an opportunity for the transformation of their agricultural sector, which hitherto has been dubbed as ‘backward,’ subsistence-based smallholder farming, particularly through technology transfers, the expansion of local infrastructure, rural employment generation and towards achieving national food security (Salami et al. 2010, von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009). In this respect, the responses from host governments in a dozen of African countries have been substantial in terms of promoting investor-friendly land market environments such as very small land rents, tax waivers, limited restrictions on production and exports, and so on.

Although new opportunities could be created from increases in land investments for national growth, what is posed and still remains central and inadequately addressed are critical questions regarding land rights of poor local communities. Empirical evidence is scarce so far with regard to actual and potential impacts of land-use change on the poor who are at risk of losing access to and control over land. Castel and Kamara (2009) have pointed that since such investments are largely meant for the export market, they do not necessarily contribute to ensuring local food security. It has also been indicated that many recent large-scale farmland investments have entailed the dispossession and displacement of rural households, damaging their local livelihoods, food security and access to key resources such as water (HLPE 2011: 34). More interestingly, due to inherently asymmetrical power relations, large-scale land deals involving powerful national and international corporate actors are more likely to put local livelihoods at risk (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009).

In the case of Ethiopia, the recent and on-going high profile land acquisitions measuring millions of hectares of agricultural land by domestic and foreign corporate investors in lowland areas of Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia and SNNPR regions have raised widespread concerns. These regions have in particular become the main destinations for many of the investors desperate for vast commercial farmland. The influx of investors and the subsequent enclosure of large tracts of land have attracted great attention mainly from academic circles, political parties, social movements and civil society organizations as well as the media regarding its impact on the livelihoods and food security of local people and concerns about the environment.

Some anecdotal evidence from the emerging literature shows that damaging impacts on 'local communities' have already been occurring, and indeed potential threats are also currently noticeable. However, I assume that the impacts of such 'large-scale farmland investments' may not equally affect local communities since the rural population is socially differentiated in terms of gender, ethnicity and social class. Differentiated communities occupying different positions in the socio-economic and political power relations may not equally benefit or lose out from these 'farmland investments'. Furthermore, it appears that the reaction of communities to land-use changes induced by these 'investments' may not be unvarying too. Unfortunately, the existing literature and debates on the issue provide very little or no empirical evidence towards a better understanding of the differentiated impacts on and reaction of local communities to these changes. Aiming at providing empirical evidence that could better inform existing debates, this study examines the differentiated impacts of land acquisitions on local communities as well as local reactions through exploring the current trends and contradictions of the land allocation processes. The study also aims to shed light on how contests over land and authority are played out in federal and regional state contexts.

Above all, the major issues involved in the current land acquisitions in Benishangul-Gumuz region extend beyond livelihoods and have a particular political economy implication. This is particularly important because of the fact that the land deals are underway in the regions that were historically marginalized in many aspects, although the central state has always maintained its key concern in these 'marginal' areas in the borderlands related to the control of territory and people. This particular political economy reconnects to the historic marginalizations as reflected in the subordinated power relations characteristic of mainly pre-1991, but also being reasserted very recently associated with land investments. This study thus demonstrates recent contradictions in the relationship between the federal and regional state level authority over land and natural resources in which confusions at different sites of authority over procedures and processes associated with land deals are contested in practice. In so doing, the study reveals that the current land allocation process based neither on the mapping of existing land uses nor on genuine participation of local communities and authorities has been resulting simultaneously not only in the dispossession and displacement of indigenous communities from their villages and cultivated lands, but also the destruction of the natural environment that long sustained ecological services and local livelihoods. Consequently, apparent threats have been posed to their economic, cultural and ecological survival. It is important to note that not all ethnic groups, but Gumuz and Berta ethnic groups who depend on customary forms of land access and control and whose livelihoods depend heavily on natural resources appear being disproportionately affected. Nor are all gender groups endure the effects equally.

Situating around political power relationships between federal and regional state, and how this is played out in terms of recent land deals, this study examines impacts on the livelihoods of local communities as a result of changes in land-use induced by the ongoing land acquisitions, and explore the reactions of local communities to such changes through a case study within three selected *woredas* (districts) of the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state. The next section briefly introduces competing perspectives concerning how land grabs are conceived and contested and the associated conceptual issues. The third section surveys agrarian relations, commercialization and large-scale land investments in Ethiopia. The fourth sketches the study region and *woredas*. The fifth section briefly presents the regional trends and contradictions of land allocations, followed by a discussion of the implications for local communities. The final section draws some conclusions.

## 2 Competing perspectives and conceptual issues on contemporary global land grabs

Recent debates on the contemporary political economy of 'land grabs' has tended to follow three main lines of conceptions in understanding the main issues embedded in it. In this respect, the understanding of how these different debates are framed is important because of the fact that the framings influence the ways in which a range of interest groups perceive and contest the politics of global land grabbing. This, in turn, provides essential background for understanding the broader discourses and competing perspectives that are (re)shaping policies regarding recent tides of large-scale land transfers in many developing countries.

The first line of argument focuses on the implications of 'large-scale investments' in farmland for local communities, arguing that such investments threaten the livelihoods and food security of millions of poor rural people as well as raise the risks of environmental destruction and social and political upheavals. According to the proponents of this conception, it will lead to further marginalization of poor people in rural areas. Arguments for the poverty reduction roles of current (trans)national commercial land deals have been also equally contested, claiming that it will supposedly result in a net transfer of land-based wealth and power from the poor to the rich and therefore greatly benefits only few privileged groups such as agrarian capitalists, elites and state agents. All these connected concerns have been loudly echoed by many international activist organizations and radical social movements in an effort to resist them.

The second argument, which is mainly spearheaded by international financial institutions and agencies (such as FAO and IFAD) with a neo-liberal precept, holds the conviction that 'large-scale land investments' have considerable potentials to contribute to multiple development objectives of developing countries if managed well while at the same time acknowledging the challenges and risks posed. This mainstream development discourse argues that the main problems that could result from the wave of these investments can be minimized and regulated to ensure that the investments do not adversely affect local communities. To this end, they propose the need to improve the transparency and accountability of the deals and processes culminating in such investments in order to translate the anticipated opportunities into a 'win-win-win' deal (in which benefits will be shared equitably between local communities, host governments and investors). As the backdrop of this optimistic standpoint, the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investments (RAI) were proposed by the World Bank and others (FAO, IFAD, UNCTAD) to regulate these investments for better results.



However, such moves for 'responsible investment' have suffered from wide-ranging criticisms (Borras and Franco 2010, De Schutter 2011, Li 2011). For De Schutter (2011), for example, the RAI principles are 'inadequate' to ensure the protection of land-users and insist that "instead of rising to the challenges of developing agriculture in a way that is more socially and environmental sustainable, we act as if accelerating the destruction of the global peasantry could be accomplished responsibly."

The third strand of thinking, which is in a stark contrast to the positions taken up by mainstream policy institutions, stresses its ramifications for agrarian structural change and subsequent process of social differentiation. Proponents of this strand firmly argue that what emerges out of current trends of large-scale land transfers to private and public investors is a type of agrarian structure and relation that produce the processes of accumulation that are ostensibly predicated upon mechanisms of, what the agrarian political economy literature calls, social differentiation (e.g., Akram-Lodhi 2008: 1160, Kay 2009: 128, McMichael 2008, Veltmeyer 2004). This shift will thus ultimately further the process of peasant class differentiation and expand marginalization of the peasantry which in turn leads to depeasantization and massive proletarianization, forcing them to subsist by selling their labour-power. This was at the core of the argument put forward by McMichael (2008), who argues that corporate-driven agricultural structures exemplify agrarian capitalist accumulation by lowering the costs of labour and thus the end result of these processes is that it "rules out a place for peasants, physically expelling them from the land, and epistemologically removing them from history" (McMichael 2008: 213, see also Veltmeyer 2004, Kay 2000). Notwithstanding this articulation, Rahmato (2009b) argues that rural class differentiation is not a bad thing so long as it takes its own natural course. Rahmato rightly argues that agrarian transformation achieved through the agency of smallholder peasants turning into commercial farmers is the best way to bring a change which will be more sustainable than the one spearheaded by investors or landed classes. He holds the conviction that this route does not involve large-scale peasant dispossession and displacements from the land and make them wage labourers, and thus it is critical to ensure local food security and accumulation. In his own words:

*I believe such a farmer will not be driven by the brutal ethos of naked capitalism but will instead engage in a form of enterprise combining capitalist and associative elements such as co-operatives, peer-based credit services, group-based investment ventures, and environmental-friendly management practices. ...If eventually the dissolution of the peasantry is to occur, it will occur through the internal evolution of that class and the emergence of different social forces within it.*

Rahmato 2009b: 350

In an era of neo-liberal hegemony, it has been also argued that the looming of corporate agriculture ever larger accelerates the commodification of land by a class of emerging agrarian capitalist bourgeoisie interested in the productive and speculative use of land resources contributing to ongoing 'accumulation by dispossession' (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009b: 324-7). For understanding the lubricants of these processes, Harvey (2003: 147) stress that "we have to look at the speculative raiding carried out by hedge funds and other institutions of finance capital as the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession in recent times." In this regard, neo-liberal policies, international financial institutions and private and sovereign wealth funds have been identified as the main

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culprits for facilitating today's enclosures wearing the label of 'investments' while entailing the loss of land rights for poor rural people.

Borras and Franco (2012), who are critical of the neo-liberal approach, rightly argue that analysis of the dynamics of changes in land-use and land property relations constituted in land grabs should be brought to the core of current debates for any serious understanding of the politics of global land grabbing. For that, they emphasize the need to employ a class analysis to gain better insights. Backed by empirical findings, they therefore argue that contemporary land grabs result in changes in land property relations with a strong tendency to favouring dominant groups, while dispossessing and displacing poor rural people.

### **Land-use change: conceptual issues**

Land-use change denotes a key notion in debates about current (trans)national commercial land deals. The critics of current global land grabs focus on the changes brought to existing land uses with its far-reaching implications on the livelihoods of those who have been using it. While a particular land-use change has its own specific features and directions, it must also, at least, relate to broad typologies.

The dominant land grab narrative primarily focuses on the conversion of lands previously used for the production of food crops or forestry purposes for domestic use to export-oriented food and biofuel production. This narrative, however, falls short to comprehend more closely the complex specificities of current land-use changes. This in turn urges a re-focus on the theme so as to avoid oversimplification of emerging trends and their associated socioeconomic and political correlates.

In delineating the trajectories of large-scale shifts in land-use unfolding today, Borras and Franco (2012) provide a detailed framework for a systematic analysis of the underlying pattern of emerging changes for a better understanding of how and why such changes occur, as well as their implications to local land-users. They observe that current trends of land-use change up-surfing in Africa and elsewhere have many faces though may differ from one setting to the next.

Borras and Franco identify four broadly distinct typologies of current land-use changes and emphasized that there are many different sub-variants within each of these four main patterns. The first broad type of land-use shift points towards changes occurring within food-oriented production. In this case, the land continues to be dedicated to the production of food crops, yet with changes in the purpose of production. Here, the change in the purpose of production involved commoditization and the shift away from producing for local consumption. It denotes a change from food production meant for consumption or domestic exchange to export-oriented food production. The other sub-variant within this broad category follows the other way round in which land previously dedicated for the production of food crops and animal feed for the export market is being converted into small-scale farm units in order to produce food for domestic use and exchange.

The second main typology involves change in land-use from food to biofuel production. Under this category, some of the current global land deals involved the conversion of lands devoted for food production to corporate-driven biofuel production for export and/or for local consumption and the domestic market. It could also be a type of change to biofuel production at the community level for household needs and local consumption.

The third type presents a land-use change in which lands devoted to 'non-food' uses such as forest lands, grasslands, wetlands and 'wastelands' are being converted to food production purposes. The fourth broad pattern of change represents the conversion of forest, 'marginal' and 'waste' lands to biofuel production that can be used for local consumption/exchange purposes or export markets.

Borras and Franco's typologies provide a suggestive framework for analyzing the socioeconomic and political dynamics of changes in land-use and its implications for different social classes and groups.

While recent widespread land purchase and lease arrangements involve shifts in land uses from local farming towards mainly export-oriented land uses to meet food and energy needs of faraway global markets (Mann and Smaller 2010), it is necessary to go beyond changes in land-use and examine closely the dynamics of related changes in land property relations that are occurring (Borras and Franco 2012).<sup>1</sup>

Polanyi's argument about 18<sup>th</sup> century enclosures has its relevance as a theoretical foundation in relation to looking at today's (contemporary) enclosures, albeit with reference to developing countries. He was very critical of the market system particularly regarding its 'vagaries' and 'perils'. He offers explanations of how people faced with exploitation agitated against displacements which threatened the fabric of society through enclosures that had "deprived the country folk of their homes and plots, and thrown them on the labor market" (Polanyi 1944). As a way out, Polanyi (1944) therefore suggests that de-commodifying the "fictitious commodities of labor, land, and money" are necessary prerequisites for the emancipation of society from the manacles of the market. An important continuity of this line of thinking is a well-known work by Harvey (2003) on the new mechanisms of 'accumulation by dispossession' which is critical of mainstream development under capitalism and that makes a lot of sense to conceptualize the commodification of land and forceful expulsion of peasants in the developing world today.

Approached from the standpoints of these theoretical roots, emerging empirical evidence demonstrates that contemporary land grabs already have entailed damages on the lives and livelihoods of poor rural people through dispossession, dislocation and displacements; and the impacts generally tended to be differentiated among and between different social classes and groups in rural areas (e.g., McCarthy 2010, Borras et al. 2011, Fernandes et al. 2010, Ariza et al. 2010). Nonetheless, poor rural people who have been threatened or dispossessed and pushed off the land have continuously reacted and struggled in various forms to regain land rights. As argued by Borras and Franco (2012:53), such contemporary land struggles are therefore 'struggles against dispossession'.

Together these and other related works inspired by agrarian political economy instruments (e.g., Li 2011, White and Dasgupta 2010, Borras et al. 2011, Borras and Franco 2012) provide the tools with which to untangle the intricacies around the politics of global land grabbing. This study greatly benefited from engagement within these works to get its analytical frameworks, concepts, and tools.

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<sup>1</sup>Just not land-use change but also crop use changes resulting from current trends of global land-grab deserve attention. Crop use change refers to changes in the way crops are used. For example, changes from food to fuel and animal feed, and also whether the crops produced are meant for domestic consumption or for export (changes from domestic use to export market) (see Borras and Franco 2011: 22). In the context of Ethiopia, there is a very high concern related to emerging crop use change with regard to shifts towards promoting food crop production primarily for export amidst persisting food insecurity.

### 3 Agrarian Relations in Ethiopia: Land, Peasants and the State

An argument in favour of agriculture-led development has been at the core of Ethiopia's overall development strategy over the last two decades. In countries such as Ethiopia where poverty and food insecurity are pervasive, rapid growth of the agricultural sector can lead to significant reductions in poverty and income inequality as well as improved food security. But the critical issue that determines whether agriculture can be capable of making broad-based contributions to development while at the same time reducing poverty and food insecurity relates greatly to the structure of the sector and its reciprocal linkages to the rest of the economy.

After the fall of the military Derg regime in 1991, the government that assumed power since then pursued the Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI) strategy as a central pillar of its economic policy. Under ADLI, emphasis is placed on rapid economic development to be driven mainly by smallholder-based peasant agriculture and the strategy was underpinned by a central tenet that the country's overall development was to be agriculture- and rural-centered in which smallholder peasants and pastoralists constitute its core. Its rationale rests on the argument that the country's chief and abundant resources are land and labor and hence employing these resources efficiently can provide the best alternative to bring about rapid growth and sustainable development. In fact, the emphasis placed on the smallholder sub-sector makes a lot of sense for the reason that this sector comprises the overwhelming majority of the country's population who live and work in rural areas, producing a lion's share of the country's agricultural production. In addition, it is premised on the assertion that poverty and food insecurity are greatly concentrated in rural areas where livelihoods are fundamentally grounded in the smallholder sector. I will return to this shortly.

Many of the arguments directed at agriculture's role for poverty reduction, both theoretically and empirically, are based on its far-reaching implications that can be seized through multiple channels including direct effects on raising income of the rural poor; providing more food at affordable prices to the poor; farm employment generation; creation of more opportunities in the rural non-farm economy via production and consumption linkages; generating foreign exchange earnings for industrial imports and generating investible capital and labor for industrial development (DFID 2004, IFPRI 2005). Numerous studies tend to confirm agriculture's substantial role for poverty reduction (e.g., Ravallion and Datt 1996, Wiggins et al. 2010, Christiaensen et al. 2010, Diao et al. 2010, Ligon and Sadoulet 2007, Cervantes-Godoy and Dewbre 2010).

In contrast, Ethiopia's agricultural sector, particularly smallholder peasant farming, endured discriminatory and exploitative policies and institutional structures that were greatly growth-constraining, especially until early 1990s (Chole 2004). For instance, during the Imperial monarchy before 1974, primacy was accorded to industrial growth rather than agriculture, which was understandably influenced by the then popular 'import-substitution' orthodoxy. Agriculture was relegated to play instrumental roles in supplying resources for the intended growth of the modern sector, typically the manufacturing industry. For this reason, policies tended to favor modern, large-scale commercial farming while peasant agriculture was pushed to the sidelines. In the words of Bahru Zewde, a doyen of Ethiopian Historians, "agrarian development was conceived not so much in terms of the fostering of a prosperous and strong peasant sector as the promotion of commercial agriculture" (Zewde 2008a: 125). As a result, smallholder peasant agriculture lacked capital investment, technical support and extension services (Aredo 1990). The then feudal land system

was instrumental for the expansion of large commercial farms and encouraged concentration of land in the hands of absentee landlords that led to the dispossession and eviction of a large number of peasants especially in the southern part of the country. For example, the expansion of mechanized commercial farms, which were generally restricted to the Awash valley particularly for sugar and cotton (operated by Dutch and British companies, respectively), entailed considerable human traumas of pastoral displacement and the commercial exploitation of cheap labour (Zewde 2008a: 121). Based on extensive empirical works, Zewde (2008a) describes the crucial attributes of destruction embedded in the development of mechanized commercial agriculture and agro-industry pointing in particular to the case of Wonji-Shoa Sugar estate (from 1951-1974) in the Awash valley as follows:

*With characteristic vigor and recklessness, and with the connivance and collaboration of Government, [international capital] appropriated tens of thousands of hectares...In the process, the Afar and Oromo, ancestral inhabitants of the valley, were shunted off to less fertile areas. Hanging on to the slopes of nearby hills and eking out a miserable existence, they looked on as sugar and cotton dominated the scene.*

Zewde 2008a: 120-121

This passage illustrates the inherent character and contradictions of agrarian capitalistic accumulation, and the historical context in which the government allied with capital to expropriate the peasantry and pastoralists under the banner of developing commercial agriculture. This is a typical example that showed the dynamics of the process of dispossession and displacement that has historically characterized the development of large-scale mechanized farms during the Imperial period.<sup>2</sup>

Through the 1960s, the feudal system that made possible the subordination of the wider peasantry favoring the landed nobility, the church, feudal landlords, state officials and bureaucrats was persistently counteracted by popular movements spearheaded mainly by students loudly voicing the iconic 'land to the tiller' slogan. Finally, widespread and swelling social and economic difficulties in the country catalyzed the political grievances that eventually toppled the Imperial regime (Chole 2004).

The Derg regime that overtook power after the 1974 revolution also continued the legacy of favouring the industrial sector much more than agriculture. Nonetheless, large commercial farms were nationalized and converted into state and collective farms. The limited state support that existed almost exclusively privileged and went to state farms. Despite this, the 1974 revolution responded positively to the long-standing rallying bawl for 'land to the tiller' by abolishing the landed nobility and tenancy, and therewith the disintegration of feudal relations of agrarian production. In this respect, the regime introduced the most radical land reform the country has known by eliminating a complex mix of tenure systems (such as communal, church, state and private) that existed during the Imperial period<sup>3</sup> and replacing them with state ownership. Thus, land rights of ownership were bestowed to the state. While the right to ownership remained confined to the state, use rights were redistributed among peasants under a usufruct system and hence prohibited the

<sup>2</sup>For a useful historical discussion of the failure of agrarian capitalism in the country, see also Rahmato (2009b: 81-110).

<sup>3</sup>As Chole (2004: 90) notes, Ethiopian peasant farmers were subjected to complex and diversified land tenure systems that were "the breeding ground for many social and economic ills" during the period of imperial rule.

transfer of any land through sale, lease or mortgage (see Rahmato 1984, 2009a, 2009b). The premise on which the land reform was based relates to the conviction that feudal relations of agrarian production had relegated the wider peasantry to desperate poverty and vulnerability. Unsurprisingly, the transfer of land ownership to the state endowed the state with greater hegemonic power over the peasantry to redefine property rights and land access, making the land question more political. The Derg was heavily criticized for widely exploiting the peasantry through its various manipulative policies pursued to expropriate resources from the agricultural sector especially the peasantry for sponsoring industrial growth and providing low-priced food to urban people. Its outcome was agricultural stagnation and the prevalence of rural poverty.

The current regime under the leadership of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of ethnic-based parties that has been in power since the fall of the Derg, claims to quench the deep-seated thirst of the peasantry through the instrumentality of its 'developmentalist state'. The regime embraced ADLI which aspires to reverse decades-long neglect and exploitation of the agricultural sector in general and the smallholder peasant farming sub-sector in particular. To this end, ADLI remains an overarching policy framework for successive poverty reduction strategies pursued such as Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP), Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP) and the recently launched Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP). Central to ADLI, the current regime maintained Derg's conviction of equality in control over land and thus declared that land will remain public property, wherein peasants continue to have only use rights over the land they cultivate. As stipulated in Article 40 (3) of the 1995 Constitution "the right to ownership of rural and urban land, as well as of all natural resources is exclusively vested in the state and in the peoples of Ethiopia. Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or to other means of exchange" (FDRE 1995).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the current land policy provides some room for short-term land transfers such as the ability to rent or sub-contract land for a short time (FDRE 2005).

The main justification for the current state ownership of land rests upon the conviction that every rural individual should be entitled the right to a plot of land sufficient for his/her livelihood and that this right could be claimed in his/her locality. Nonetheless this key right would be removed if land ownership were privatized. In this respect, the government insistently argues that commercializing land by way of private ownership will lead to the dispossession/displacement of the peasantry through distress sale or eviction. The government insists that privatization of land will inexorably give rise to the concentration of ownership of rural property in the hands of a minority and increase the problem of landlessness. Throughout its rule, therefore, the government has defiantly opposed the transactions of land, and the land policy, the government argues, limits class differentiation within rural communities and protects the emergence of a class of large landholders.

<sup>4</sup>The country's Constitution, which was adopted in 1995, established a federal political system with ethnically defined regions (killils). The federal government comprises nine regional states (namely Tigray; Afar; Amhara; Oromia; Somali; Benishangul-Gumuz; Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' (SNNP); Gambella and Harari) and two administrative cities (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa). Currently, the administrative structure of the country consists of killil (region), below which is further decentralized to zone (province), woreda (district) and kebele (sub-district/lowest administrative unit). According to the Constitution, power is devolved to these regions or states, including the administration of land and natural resources.

While the existing land policy has been able to narrow down landholding size-based rural differentiation (Rahmato 2009a), the problem of landlessness has become a reality, especially for rural youth and, consequently, measures to address the problem through the labeling down of holdings resulted in land fragmentation and declines in farm size (Rahmato 2009a, Gebreselassie 2006). Given the upward spiral of the country's agricultural population, farmers cultivate less and less land that is too small to generate sufficient livelihoods for their household, making prospects for escaping from poverty through agricultural intensification dubious. For example, about a third of rural households cultivate holdings measuring less than 0.5 hectares (Rahmato 2008). Assessing the results of the current land system, Rahmato (2009a: 49) pointed out that "[a]t any rate, social equality has come at a heavy price, in that the equality that is unfolding in the countryside is equality of poverty". Similarly, Devereux et al. (2005: 123) argue that "equalization of assets in rural communities has contributed to agricultural stagnation, and is keeping the majority of Ethiopians trapped in poverty". Despite these, Eastwood et al. (2004: 2) argue that the concentration of land into large units, due to one or more reasons, which creates a state of very unequal distribution of land would retard agricultural development amongst those countries faced with labour surpluses and capital constraints.

Cognizant of numerous structural constraints to the agricultural sector, the government through ADLI implemented a number of agricultural development programmes to promote the adoption of improved inputs and practices in order to enhance agricultural productivity and production. The strategy focused on provision of improved inputs, provision of livestock breeds, promotion of small-scale irrigation, environmental protection and natural resource management, enhancing access to financial services, employment generation, expanding rural infrastructure and marketing services.

Reiterating the success of its smallholder-based strategy, the government claims that due to its continuous commitment to providing proven supports geared towards enhancing their productivity, smallholder farmers have demonstrated a capacity to increase their contribution to agricultural growth and thereby to the national economy, and thus insist that smallholders' agriculture will continue to be the major source of agricultural growth under the newly launched five-year development plan (MoFED 2010). In this regard, it has been indicated that the agricultural sector has grown rapidly at an average annual growth rate of 8.4 per cent during the last five-year period from 2005/06 to 2009/10 (MoFED 2010). In terms of its share in GDP, the latest government report indicated that the contribution of agriculture declined from 46 percent in 2004/05 to 41 percent in 2010/2011 (MoFED 2012). The government estimates that the country's per capita income has now reached to 392 USD in 2010/11. In addition, it also indicated a declining poverty head count in which the national level of absolute poverty head count index declined to 29.6 percent in 2010/11 compared to 38.7 percent in 2004/05. Similarly, the food poverty head count index (hunger) declined from 38 percent to 33.6 percent (MoFED 2012).<sup>5</sup>

Despite this recent progress, the challenges of poverty and food insecurity remain, ironically, widespread and have been persistent over time. For example, about 10 per cent of the country's population has always been chronically food insecure (UN 2009). With regard to food insecurity,

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<sup>5</sup>The share of people who are multidimensionally poor is much higher i.e., the multidimensional poverty (MPI) headcount is 90 percent, which is one of the highest (UNDP 2010).

there were about 7.7 million food insecure people who benefited from the productive safety net program in 2010/11 (MoFED 2012: 20).<sup>6</sup>

There is a paradox and complexity in understanding the country's agricultural sector, which employs about 85 percent of the population but has been unable to provide sufficient food to its people. For many scholars the roots of rural poverty lie in the agricultural sector (Rahmato 2009a, Gebreselassie 2006, Nega et al. 2003, wa Githinji and Mersha 2007), and growth performance of the sector greatly determines economic growth of the country. However, as widely argued, the sector being dominated by rain-fed low productivity subsistence agriculture has been crawling for years trapped by numerous structural problems including declining farm size, farmland fragmentation, population pressure, land tenure insecurity, farmland scarcity, erratic rainfall, environmental degradation, low rural income and productivity (Nega et al. 2003, Tolossa 2005, Gebreselassie 2006, Rahmato 2008, 2009a). Droughts have also been a recurring phenomenon in the country. For example, since the mid-1960s, the country has been hit 15 times by drought and as such droughts have been a convenient scapegoat for persisting food insecurity (UN 2009). Nevertheless, the livelihoods of rural people have been relegated to "remain permanently precarious, hanging on the slender probability of nature's continuous generosity" by the socio-economic and political relations characterized by asymmetries in power (Wolde-Mariam 1986: 19). These forces have long been considered responsible in making rural livelihoods vulnerable to any adverse natural factors. Indeed these intricacies need to be addressed in order to invigorate the agricultural sector so that it can play a considerable role in the social and economic development of the country.

### **Agricultural Commercialization and Large-scale Land Investments**

Since 2005, emphasis has been placed on greater commercialization of agriculture and the expansion of private sector participation for accelerating growth and poverty eradication.<sup>7</sup> The consecutive five-year development plans (particularly PASDEP and GTP) envisaged that while increasing the productivity of smallholder agriculture remains central, it encourages greater private sector participation in large-scale extensive commercial agriculture, particularly with an export focus. In this regard, a spatially differentiated strategy of promoting smallholder commercialization and large-scale commercial agriculture has been put in place. On the one hand, focus has been given to the commercialization of smallholder farming to enhance smallholders' roles in intensified production of marketable agricultural products across much of the highlands, and also private sector investment in floriculture and horticulture mainly in the surrounding highland areas close to major urban centers.<sup>8</sup> The objective here is to enable smallholder farmers to gradually shift from subsistence, low productivity agriculture to market-driven production of high value products in order to increase their incomes. Accordingly, this process of agricultural transformation is based on greater commercialization and diversification. On the other hand, a strong push exists towards the

<sup>6</sup>In the year 2010/11, a total of 7,748,305 food insecure beneficiaries were included in the cash- and food-for-work Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) implemented as part of food security programs aimed at supporting chronically food insecure households to fill their income gaps, and engaging them in community asset-building activities (MoFED 2012: 20).

<sup>7</sup>Although due attention has been paid to both agricultural commercialization and promotion of the private sector investment since the time of the last poverty reduction document (PASDEP), regulatory initiatives aimed at attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) through the establishment of various support and incentive mechanisms since 2002/03 (see FDRE 2002, 2003), which were further amended in 2008 (FDRE 2008).

<sup>8</sup>In this regard, a report shows that the country has been able to register a successful record of increasing export markets for flowers by private investors over the last five-year period (MoFED 2010). According to a recent government report, revenue of USD 175.3 million was generated from the export of flowers in 2010/11 (MoFED 2012: 14). However, this was USD 12.6 million in 2004/05.



development of extensive large-scale commercial agriculture undertaken by private investors in lowland peripheral areas where abundant ‘unoccupied’ or ‘unused’ land is claimed to exist.

Implicit in this spatially differentiated strategy particularly of maintaining smallholders in the historically ‘core’ highland areas appears to highlight their political significance, and reflects the current regime’s position to continue supporting the smallholder sector to maintain its existence (e.g., Lavers 2012, Makki 2012). At the same time, it highlights the growing awareness among policymakers of the fact that Ethiopian agriculture, in its present state, cannot provide considerable outlays of capital required for the industrial investments which the country needs to transform the national economy and consequently, envisions a strong push for large-scale mechanized agriculture in the lowlands. Added to these, the government seems to have gradually come to terms with the incontrovertible fact of persisting food insecurity and rural vulnerability, which demonstrated its failure to progress far along through its two-decade long agricultural strategy of distinct character.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the recent surge in leasing large tracts of agricultural land unfolding mainly in many lowland parts of the country vividly portray the predicament in which the government currently finds itself with regard to the smallholder sector. Therefore, coupled with the drivers of global large-scale land acquisitions or ‘land grabs’, the government has been keen in promoting and backing private sector investments in land resources amongst those who are interested in producing agricultural products primarily for export as part of its strategy to generate greater foreign exchange earnings. In this regard, by the end of the GTP period (2015) the government envisaged to generate a total of USD 6.58 billion from the agricultural export market, and for this to materialize, over the same period an estimated 3.3 million hectares of land (in addition to land already allotted) will be transferred to large-scale agricultural investors (MoFED 2010: 48-9).

While in much of the highlands smallholders cultivate small plots of land and face a narrowing trend of land access due to population pressure and land degradation, Ethiopia is said to have large tracts of uncultivated arable land that can potentially be developed for agricultural purposes.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, although estimates vary, the country owns about 51.3 million hectares of arable land, out of which only about 11.7 million hectares are currently being utilized (MoARD 2010: 3) – and this agricultural land potential is assumed to exist in the peripheral lowland areas.<sup>11</sup> According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the lack of capital and technology are the major factors that have constrained the utilization of the country’s large investment potential for agricultural development (MoARD 2009: 3). This has been a key hypothesis put forward to justify recent commitments to promoting and expanding FDI in the land sector in order to develop and harness its potentials.

Data from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development indicate that much of the land earmarked for investment is found mainly in Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Oromia and SNNP administrative regional states. Recognition of the importance of land as a key strategic resource has led the government to set up a centralized institutional structure for controlling the administration of land that is earmarked for agricultural investment. For this purpose, MoARD has been given

<sup>9</sup>While government sources show that agriculture grew at an average annual growth rate of 8.4 percent over the last five years (MoFED 2010: 4), roughly an estimated 7-8 million people have always been chronically food insecure out of the country’s total population.

<sup>10</sup>It is estimated that nearly 55 percent of smallholders cultivate holdings measuring one hectare or less (MoARD 2010).

<sup>11</sup>In terms of irrigation potential, the country has roughly 4.3 million hectares of irrigable land. Nevertheless, only an estimated six percent of the potential is currently being utilized (MoARD 2010: 4).

overall responsibility, within which Agricultural Investment Support Directorate (AISD) was established in 2009. More specifically, AISD has been created to administer agricultural investment lands and thus, to transfer such lands to all foreign investors as well as to large domestic investors requesting lands measuring 5000 hectares or more. To this end, agricultural investment lands identified by regional states have been transferred into a centralized pool called the Federal Land Bank, which will be administered by AISD.<sup>12</sup>

While estimates vary and are at times unreliable, a World Bank report (2010) notes that the total amount of land transferred to investors in Ethiopia from the period 2004 to 2008 amounted to 1.2 million hectares (Deininger and Byerlee 2011). Yet another report from the Oakland Institute estimates that the total amount of land transferred to investors, as of January 2011, reaches roughly 3,619,509 hectares, of which a sizable amount of land is being given out in the Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Oromia and SNNPR administrative regions (Oakland Institute 2011:18). Rahmato (2011:37) puts the estimated amount of land already transferred at 3.5 million hectares and projects that the total amount of land transferred by the end of 2015 will reach seven million hectares.

The latest figures from the government's annual progress report for the first year (2010/11) of GTP implementation shows that over the last year, 1.89 million hectares of investment land have already been transferred to the Federal Land Bank. Consequently, land measuring 255,528 hectares was reportedly transferred to investors by the end of the same year, although this was admittedly far below the planned 1.5 million hectares (MoFED 2012: 20). Evidence from various sources indicates that most of the land investments have been undertaken by domestic investors and the diaspora, though the involvement of foreign investors has been significant (Oakland Institute 2011, Rahmato 2011, Deininger and Byerlee 2011). However, trends reveal that each foreign investor often leases large blocks of land when compared with domestic investors. For example, from a partial list posted on MoARD's website which indicated some of the large-scale land transfers, none of the domestic or diaspora investors leased land measuring 20,000 hectares or more. Instead, most of these individual investors leased less than 10,000 hectares of land (MoARD 2011). The most dominant foreign investors who have been undertaking substantial land investments in the country were Indians, followed by investors from the Middle East. A considerable number of Indian companies have been able to acquire sizeable agricultural lands, usually ranging from 5,000 to 100,000 hectares.

For petro-dollar Gulf States, which have devised medium to long-term plans of integrating foreign agricultural land acquisition with their national food security concerns, Ethiopia represented the most preferred destination. This is due to Ethiopia's competitiveness manifested through its geographic proximity to the region, the availability of a considerable amount of arable land, cheaper land rental rates and the existence of a government sympathetic to international capital which helpfully offered various kinds of incentives and supports. Some European (e.g., German, Danish, Italian, UK) and US investors have also participated in large-scale land acquisitions in the country. When compared to its substantial role in the country's manufacturing and infrastructure sector, China's participation in agricultural land acquisitions has been very limited.

<sup>12</sup>The Constitution of the country gives regional states the power to administer land and other natural resources, but recent rises in land values prompted the federal government to centralize the administration of land resources, taking the power from regional states. In doing so, the government's actions contradict the Constitution.

While foreign investors aim for profits and national food and energy security for their home countries, it is widely noted that strong political commitment and push from the government centered on the likely development impacts that would be achieved from large-scale investments in land resources.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, it is envisaged that the expansion of large-scale agricultural investments will benefit the country particularly through increased foreign exchange earnings from the export of crops; creating local employment opportunities; expanding local infrastructure and social services and creating opportunities for technology transfers, particularly to local farmers (Rahmato 2011).

In spite of these envisioned potential benefits, widespread concerns have been raised over possible adverse consequences of large-scale agricultural land acquisitions particularly for local rural populations, putting into question such optimism. Most significant in this regard are concerns about the implications for local people's land rights – particularly of poor, marginalized and vulnerable rural groups. Few case studies conducted in regions where large-scale land investments have been unfolding indicated peasant displacements and loss of local livelihoods (Rahmato 2011, Shete 2011, Fisseha 2011). From a case study in Bako Tibee Woreda, for instance, Rahmato (2011: 34) found that due to the transfer of their land to an Indian-based company Karuturi, 'some 500 peasants lost their plots' on which they used to eke out their livelihoods. Similarly, in Gambella land investment projects have entailed deprivations for local communities from accessing 'vital resources from what until now was their common property', and pointed that this was happening through displacements in the form of resettlement to clear the land for investors, although the reasons often given by government officials for the resettlement programs are different (ibid: 28-29).

Within the context of these emerging concerns, it is essential to look more closely at the impacts of large-scale land investments on local people traversing ethnic and gender groups and geographic ecologies. This is the theme which this paper hopes to accomplish.

## 4 Methodology and Research Sites

### 4.1 Research methods

This study conducted with a view to inform and engage with emerging debates on the land investment sector to examine the impact of land investments on land resources and livelihoods as well as changing land rights is based on qualitative research methods. Information for this study comes from a combination of different data collection methods applied during the intensive fieldwork period from April-June which includes secondary literature review, semi-structured interviews with key informants, focus group discussions, and direct field observations. Throughout the fieldwork period, tape recording was used as a tool to capture all interviews with key informants and group discussions in their entirety. In addition, intensive field notes were taken. The intensive fieldwork was undertaken from the middle of April to the end of June 2012.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with numerous key informants ranging from local people to government representatives and experts at the *woreda*, zonal and regional state

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<sup>13</sup>The recent substantial participation of domestic investors has been partially attributed to the growing recognition of the profitability of agricultural investments.

bureaus. These include local informants from selected *kebeles* of Dangur, Guba and Homosha Woredas. Informants from government offices were also interviewed including those from Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Bureau; the Regional State Investment Office; Metekel Zone Administration Council; Metekel Zone Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Department; Dangur Woreda Administration; Dangur Woreda Agriculture Office; Guba Woreda Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Office and Guba Woreda Agriculture Office. In addition, selected heads of private investment projects and NGOs were also interviewed.

In each of the *kebeles* studied, focus-group discussions were held with local community members, mainly with Gumuz and Berta ethnic groups in Metekel and Assosa zones, respectively. These ethnic groups are among those considered indigenous to the areas under investigation. The discussions principally focused on the processes of land allocation for investment purposes, impacts of land investments, local reactions and local community-investor-government relations. Participants in the discussions were randomly selected in each *kebele* included in the study. In general, primary data was collected through interviews and discussions with various groups and individuals. Furthermore, additional data were also collected from various government offices.

#### 4.2 Description of the study region and study villages

The study was conducted in the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, which is one of the nine regional states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. It is located in the northwestern part of the country between 09°17' - 12°06' North latitude and 34°10' - 37°4' East longitude. The region is bordered by Amhara regional state in the north and northeast, Oromia region in the south and southeast, and Gambella region in the south. It also shares an international boundary with Sudan in the west. Administratively, the region is divided into three zones (namely Metekel zone, Assosa zone and Kemashi zone), which are further divided into 20 *woredas*. According to the 2007 Census report, the population size of the region was 670,847 (CSA 2008), with a population density of about 14 persons per square kilometer. The ethnic groups that are considered indigenous to the region include Berta (25.9%), Gumuz (21.11%), Shinasha (7.59%), Mao (1.9%) and Komo (0.96%); non-indigenous peoples comprise 42.53% of the population. Most of the region's population lives in rural areas (86.5%), out of which the overwhelming majority is comprised of indigenous ethnic groups, while the non-indigenous groups reside mainly in towns (MoFA 2010).

In terms of land-use patterns, the region's landmass is predominantly comprised of bushes and shrubs (77.4%), while forestland constitutes about 11.4%. Further, cultivated land, grazing land and marginal land constitutes about 5.3%, 3.2% and 2.3%, respectively. While the region generally lies between an altitude of 580 and 2731 meters above sea level (masl), its largest part is in the lowlands situated below 1500 masl. In this regard, about 75% of the region is classified as lowland (ibid).

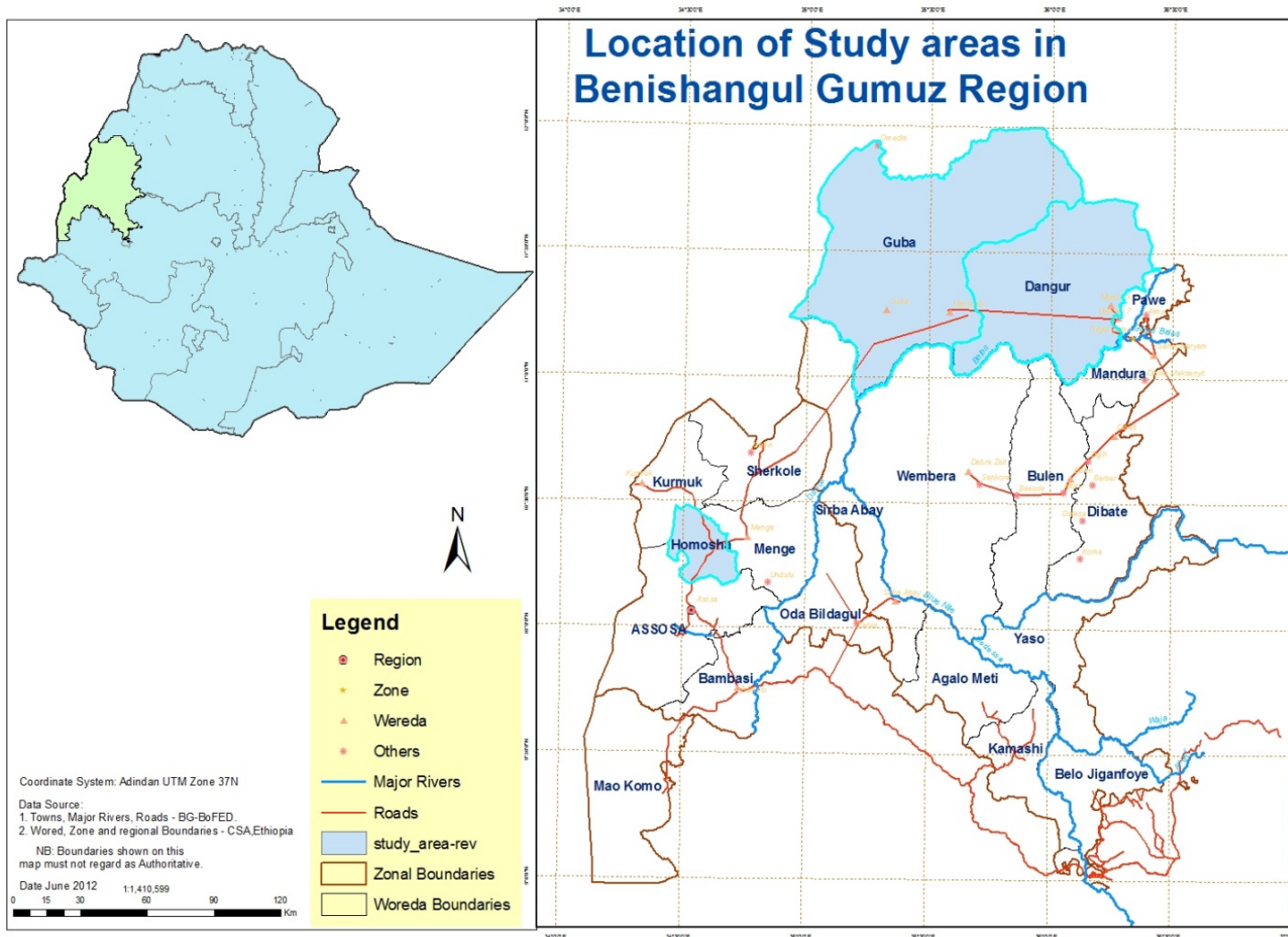


Figure 1 Location of Study areas in Benishangul Gumuz Region

For intensive fieldwork, two *woredas* from Metekel Zone namely Dangur Woreda and Guba Woreda were selected purposively. In addition, a short visit was made in Homosha Woreda of Assosa Zone in order to strengthen the findings. The selection of these *woredas*, mainly Dangur and Guba, was underpinned by the fact that the two *woredas* are the main foci of the recent rain-fed agricultural investments in the region where pressure on the land resource is occurring. There are an increasing number of investment projects in the two *woredas*. Thus, these areas are considered important for the study of the dynamics of agricultural investments, as they provide the opportunity to look at the dynamics around the emerging land-use change particularly on land allocation practices, impacts on land resources and land-use practices. These areas are predominantly inhabited by the Gumuz ethnic group, although there is a moderate mix of Shinasha, Agaw and Amhara ethnic groups mainly in Dangur Woreda. The Gumuz depend mainly on slash-and-burn agriculture and livestock-raising. In addition, the Gumuz also depend on other subsidiary livelihood sources such as traditional gold mining, gathering wild forest foods, honey collection, firewood collection, fishing, hunting, charcoal preparation and handicrafts.

Taking Dangur Woreda and Guba Woreda as the main case study areas, in-depth interviews with informants and discussions with community members were conducted at the village level. Within these *woredas*, some villages were carefully selected based on investment concentration as well as expert opinion, particularly regarding accessibility and representativeness. Through this process, three *kebeles* namely Gimtiya, Dachigeri and Qotta from Dangur Woreda and two *kebeles* namely Ayicid and Mankush (Yabulu Gott) from Guba Woreda were selected. In addition, the Berta ethnic group predominant in Tsori-al-metema Kebele in Homosha Woreda of Assosa Zone was also included. As part of the research strategy of direct observation, a brief field trip from Mankush town to Almelhal town was also made so as to capture some important aspects that were not fully represented in the selected *kebeles*.

## 5 Land Investment in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State: Trends and Contradictions

It has been argued that the onset of rapid economic growth registered over the past five years in the country was mainly attributed to agricultural growth that in turn initiated the process of structural transformation of production across sectors (MoFED 2010). The government envisages continuing accelerated growth of the agricultural sector so as to foster economic growth and thus the participation of the private sector in agriculture has been increasingly promoted. As already indicated, with regard to major acquisitions of land for commercial investments in the country, Benishangul-Gumuz regional state is a typical case in point.

Evolving trends in the region indicate increasing levels of land transfers to investors for agricultural investment particularly since 2005. Based on data compiled from various sources, the amount of land transferred in the region to investors, both domestic and foreign, reaches 390,590 hectares. The transfer of such an amount of land has been undertaken both by the regional state and the federal governments. Within the region, the responsibility of transferring land to investors was previously vested in the

Investment Office. The process was that prospective investors interested to engage in agricultural investment in the region directly apply at the Investment office for an investment certificate. Once they get the investment certificate they are then eligible to request land for agricultural investment through lease arrangements. Investors submit written applications for investment lands to the Investment office. In this case, the trend was that potential investors normally indicate in their applications the *woreda* where they are interested in investing, even sometimes further specifying the *kebele*. Then the Investment Office directly writes to the indicated *woreda* to identify land appropriate for the investment purpose, instructing that the land to be identified should not be under use by farmers as well as not covered by plant species that are threatened to disappear and cannot be replaced. The *woreda* administrative council then appoints an ad-hoc committee that can accomplish the task of identifying the required land and facilitate the transfer process. As the *kebeles* are responsible for land allocations, the committee also includes *kebele* representatives to identify the required land for investment activities, and thus undertakes the demarcation of the boundaries of the land through traditional ways.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the minutes of the committee regarding its activities is thereby sent to the Regional Investment Office, which is then eventually presented to the regional investment board which has been chaired by the president of the regional state for the final decision.<sup>15</sup> In that way, investors acquire rural investment lands through arrangements ranging from short-term contracts to long-term leases after signing the contract with the president.<sup>16</sup> This process has left many fault lines that have arguably created ineffectiveness and adverse consequences, as we shall see in the course of the discussion.

Data obtained from the Regional Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use indicate that through the Investment Office, more than 280 investment projects have acquired rural land in the period between 2005-2010 covering over 126,159.6 hectares across the region. Almost all of these investors were domestic investors that were allotted land measuring from 100 to 8000 hectares by the regional state, the majority being less than 500 hectares.

**Table 1: Number of Land Investment Projects Granted Land by the Regional Government**

Zone	Woreda	Number of Investment Projects	Land Size (Hectare)	Remarks
Metekel Zone	Guba	100	44,592	
	Dangur	18	18,196	
	Mandura	2	488	
	Wenbera	1	500	
	Bulen	1	116	
	Pawe Special Woreda	8	1,648.3	
Assosa Zone	Assosa	11	1,337	
	Bambasi	36	11,883	

<sup>14</sup>The local unit of government administration is the *kebele*.

<sup>15</sup>The Regional Investment Board constitutes members from the regional state council, the investment office, the Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use (BoEPLAU), the Bureau of Agriculture (BoA), the Bureau of Finance and Economic Development (BoFED) and the Revenue Authority.

<sup>16</sup>The lease period in the regional state ranges from 15 to 40 years.

	Odabuldi-Guli		24	3,765
	Menge		6	1,690.3
	Kurmuk		1	609
	Sherkole		13	8,695
	Homesha		3	1,481
	Mao-Komo	Special	14	10,366
	Woreda			
<b>Kemashi Zone</b>	Yaso		13	4660
	Belojiganfoy		14	15,458
	Kemashi		1	170
	Agelo Meti		2	505
<b>Total</b>			<b>268</b>	<b>126,159.6</b>

SOURCE: Regional Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use, May 2012 collated by the author.

There is also a rising trend in which the federal government through the Ministry of Agriculture has been engaged in the transfer of land to both domestic and foreign investors. Evidence obtained from various sources revealed that as of January 2012 seventeen investment projects have been granted land by the federal government involving 264,431 hectares of land across the region, mainly in Metekel Zone.

**Table 2: Partial List of Land Transfers in the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State by the Federal Government**

Investor/Company Name	Origin (Domestic/Foreign)	Investment Location (Woreda)	Land Size (Hectares)	Capital Registered (Birr)
<b>Khedam Trading</b>	Diaspora	Guba Woreda	3,000	2,812,500
<b>ASKY Agri. Development</b>	Domestic	Dangur Woreda	3,000	60,279,035
<b>Tracon Trading Pvt. Ltd</b>	Domestic	Dangur Woreda	5,000	5,675,000
<b>Access Capital</b>	Domestic	Dangur Woreda	5,000	-
<b>S&amp;P Energy Solutions</b>	Foreign (Indian)	Dangur & Guba	50,000	187,000,000
<b>Keystone</b>	Diaspora	Pawe Woreda	431	-
<b>Biruhway Agro-Industry</b>	Domestic	Dangur Woreda	5,000	4,000,000
<b>Gashaw Bizu Commercial Farm</b>	Diaspora	Dangur Woreda	3,000	44,266,000
<b>Tigabu Agro-Industry</b>	Domestic	Dangur Woreda	3,000	49,128,025
<b>CLC Agro-Industry PLC</b>	Foreign (Indian)	Dangur Woreda	25,000	780,390,000
<b>Tikmet Agro-Industry</b>	Diaspora	Dangur Woreda	3,000	-
<b>Mamaye Mihert Nega</b>	Diaspora	Dangur Woreda	3,000	7,800,000
<b>Horizon Plantations Pvt.Ltd. S.Co.</b>	Foreign	Guba Woreda	20,000	190,000,000
<b>Hashim Ismael Alkawaji</b>	Foreign	Mao-Komo Special	3,000	-
<b>Getfan Mechanized Farming PLC</b>	-	Dangur Woreda	3,000	9,000,000
<b>Shamporji</b>	Foreign (Indian)	-	50,000	984,000,000
<b>Sun Biofuel (NBC)</b>	Foreign (UK)	-	80,000	-
<b>Total</b>			<b>264,431</b>	<b>1,340,350,560</b>

SOURCE: Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State Investment Office, Ministry of Agriculture, collated by the author.



Generally, an estimated 1.4 million hectares of land have been earmarked for commercial agricultural investment in the region, which will be administered by the federal government. Currently, there is strong criticism over the way in which the federal government has identified the land that is made available in the federal land bank to be transferred to potential investors. Experts and officials in different capacities interviewed unanimously indicated that the federal government identified the 'investment lands' based on the spatial analysis of satellite images and aerial photographs without verifying the data through community level socio-economic field research. The informants stressed that critical aspects such as local land-use practices and patterns were not taken into account in the land allocations, and thus created many problems for local communities as well as the environment.

Despite increasing land acquisitions across the region, classifications of land-uses have not actually been done. The practices observed in this study were based on the notion that the region has abundant "unoccupied land" that led to the promotion of large-scale commercial investments before doing the necessary land-use classifications. Attached to this is the risk of oversimplification and caricature of existing local land uses. This notion may lead to a "very rough, sometimes misleading, representation of actual existing rights to land" (Scott 1998: 47). The findings of this study also show that, by and large, land allocations were not cognizant of the fact that indigenous people, particularly the Gumuz, are shifting cultivators and communal lands that appear "unused" are indeed key sources of their livelihoods. Based on information gathered from local communities and selected informants from government offices, local consultations over classifications of land were not carried out, and thus the trend of land allocation for investment in the region was simply based on the perspective of few *kebele* leaders, *woreda* administrators, regional state officials and the federal government (e.g., Ministry of Agriculture). A farmer in his early-40s in Qotta Kebele within Dangur Woreda who expressed that he has been an active participant in community affairs remembers the way how he first came to realize the allocation of land in his village:

*No one in our village was consulted or informed about the investment land allocations which have now surrounded our village. For your surprise, I, myself by coincidence met employees of one of the investors in the field while they were clearing the land for constructing their camp when they first came. I found the situation strange and I didn't take time asking them: Who are you? Why are you clearing our land? Who gave you the permission? Promptly they told me that they were given by the Woreda administration with the consent of kebele leaders and for that, they said, they have legal documents.*

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As the above account demonstrates, transparent and broad local community consultations have not been part of the process although the role of *kebele* authorities as facilitators of the land transfer is observed. According to experts interviewed, such drawbacks emanated from the lack of clear guidelines for the allocation of land to agricultural investments, which are articulated based on the context of the region. As a result, the promotion and administration of commercial agricultural investments in the region mainly before 2010 was not consistently implemented according to land administration and use policies and proclamations designed based on the objective realities of the region. There were no sound criteria or preconditions put forward by the regional government to select competent investors among

applicants. Consequentially, most of the local ‘investors’ who have already acquired land in many parts of the region neither have the required capital nor the technology and relevant knowledge and experience to engage in commercial agricultural investments. The result of course is that most of the land is kept idle or misused. In this regard, contravening the proclamation that land cannot be sold or exchanged by any other means of exchange, it appears that some investors acquired investment lands to engage in land speculation.<sup>17</sup> Currently, for example, land acquisitions have been commonly used to benefit from financial institutions, particularly from the Development Bank of Ethiopia, since investors who have leased rural lands are eligible to present their use rights as collateral.

A joint preliminary assessment report of two regional offices reveal that from an estimated 65,540.3 hectares of land transferred in Metekel Zone since 2005, about 11,615.37 hectares is currently developed, which is less than 20 percent.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the evidence also shows that 4 investors did not totally start operation after they had acquired land within the Zone. What became evident through this study is that similar to their peasant counterparts, some of the so called ‘investors’ have been using animal traction for cultivation arguably due to the lack of capital to purchase tractors and other farm machineries. One informant (from government offices) put his sentiment regarding the situation as follows:

*Most of the time, when investors first come to apply for investment lands, they normally show up driving luxury cars as if they are rich and can afford to finance large commercial farms operated by modern farm inputs and technologies. But once they acquire land they either operate far below expectations or keep the land idle. Even some were shamefully found cultivating by oxen and donkeys.*

Another senior expert interviewed at the regional capital Assosa confirmed the tendency of few investors to use animal traction for ploughing land and pointed that such practices have been widely evident in some *kebeles* of all the three administrative zones in the region. For example, the practice of some investors who have acquired land in Jaba Kebele within Dangur Woreda, as well as in some *kebeles* of Bambasi, Yaso and Belojiganfoy Woredas could be mentioned as typical cases in this regard.

More interestingly, there were cases in which ‘investors’ who have been allocated or acquired land in one way or another engaged in renting their land to third parties, although this is in fact strictly illegal. This situation is described in the words of one key informant:

*We [the regional government] have now realized that some investors rent out the land, which they leased from the government, by making deals illegally with people whom they brought from other regions, mainly from Amhara regional state. The investor distributes his/her leased land for many of these peasants who originally came to work as wage labourers in his/her commercial farm. These peasants/labourers normally farm while living in temporary shelters*

<sup>17</sup>The Benishangul Gumuz Regional State land administration and use proclamation number 85/2010 states that “land is the common property of the state and people and it shall not be subjected to sale or other means of exchange”. Note that the term ‘land speculation’ is used here not in its full sense.

<sup>18</sup>The two regional offices were the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Bureau (BoEPLAU) and Investment Office. Note that the figures do not include those land transfers in the region that are administered by the federal government.

*they constructed on part of the land. By so doing, the investor collects rents from these peasants/wage labourers who farm the land in fragmented ways usually using animal power. This is simply anti-development activity and a rent seeking behaviour.*

Most of the informants clearly pointed out that this is because the system by which such ‘investors’ acquired investment lands did not take into account whether the applicants actually have investible capital and overall development capability. The fact that the consideration of investor development competence received such limited attention can be seen from two angles. The first argument relates to the intention of reducing restrictions in order to significantly attract potential investors, as the region is remote with limited infrastructural facilities. The other viewpoint regarded that this was intentionally overlooked to leave some grey area over which some rent-seeking government officials and their associates participated in the land acquisitions. Existing evidence lends some credence to the claim that few government officials were involved in land acquisitions. Informants in Guba Woreda explicitly disclosed that at least seven former local officials including former heads of *woreda* government offices, a former regional bureau head and a former member of Ethiopian parliament held investment lands ranging from 200 to 400 hectares in different *kebeles* within the *woreda*. During the fieldwork, I was also able to witness personally, by sheer coincidence, when one former government official of the regional state who used to assume different high government positions in the region was applying for substantial agricultural investment land in Guba Woreda.<sup>19</sup>

As part of the demonstration of current trends in land acquisitions in the region, a recent assessment report shows that some ‘investors’ did not even have any legal contract or agreement with responsible government offices.<sup>20</sup> The report revealed that about 40 ‘investors’ held land within the region without any contract made between these ‘investors’ and the government, out of which 23 were found in Metekel Zone, 8 in Assosa Zone and the remaining 7 in Kemashi Zone. In relation to this case, one informant stated that with only investment certificate some investors have been using land after acquiring the land through informal ways often by deceiving local authorities telling them that they are already in the process.

In spite of these, a new land proclamation has been adopted in 2010 to address existing wide concerns and anomalies with regard to the land sector across the region. As stated in Article 20 (2q) of the Benishangul Gumuz Regional State land administration and use proclamation number 85/2010, “rural land investment activities carried out without consideration of investor development capability and environmental concerns, prior the proclamation, shall make corrections step by step through study and appropriate law”. Accordingly, some measures have been taken following this proclamation. Information obtained from the Regional Investment Office indicates that a total of 32 agricultural investment projects have been cancelled for different reasons. Despite this, unsurprisingly some of these cancelled projects are still using the land. A report revealed that those previously cancelled 8

<sup>19</sup>This happened while I was at Guba Woreda Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Branch Office and Agriculture office for consultations as part of the fieldwork.

<sup>20</sup>This was a joint assessment report on agricultural investment projects by Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Bureau and Investment Office. May 2012, Assosa.

projects within Guba Woreda were found using the land as observed during field visits by the regional government assessment team.

Although the proclamation was enacted by the regional state with the objective of administering its land and natural resources through strengthening the participation of farmers, investors and organizations to use land properly in line with development objectives of the government, its implementation is currently very far from encouraging.<sup>21</sup>

As already indicated, rising trends indicate that increasing levels of land transfers to investors have been directly carried out by the federal government, despite the constitutional proclamation that granted regions with the authority to administer land and other natural resources. Zewde (2008b: 353) made the point that “political power (alas!) has its own logic; it is not necessarily bound by promises and constitutional guarantees”. It has been argued that this trend of administering land by the federal government is justified in relation to the prevailing limited capacity of the regional government to manage substantial land investments. The argument was that the lack of adequate institutional infrastructure among emerging regions to govern land deals involving large commercial investments could mainly permit corruption. Almost all informants from the regional government offices admitted the claim that there exists weak institutional capacity in the region to effectively administer its land, and thus they have shown a general tendency in supporting the role of the federal government in filling the gap. A key informant observes it as follows:

*Currently, the regional government does not have strong institutional capacity to promote and attract potential investors, especially foreign companies. Previously, land investment and administration processes involved many offices. But since 2010, these responsibilities have been predominantly handled by the Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Bureau. As a newly established office, it has limited technical and administrative capacity to manage growing land investments. So we believe that the involvement of the federal government to attract investors will fill the observed gaps in the regional trend. So far in addition to domestic investors, Indian and UK companies have come to our region through the federal government. In terms of their investment capacity and overall potential, these investors are much better when compared with those investors who have been granted land by the regional government.*

Despite this, a lot of ambiguity and criticisms have been raised regarding the involvement of the federal government in the administration of investment lands, with particular concerns over the processes and relations of power it implicated.

Information collected during the fieldwork reveals that neither local communities nor respective regional authorities were involved in the land deals committed so far by the federal government. Due to this, it appears difficult for the regional government to challenge and negotiate land transfers that may potentially affect local land rights as well as to promote investments based on distinct regional socioeconomic and ecological contexts. Interestingly, detailed information on those investment projects that have acquired land through the federal government is not available in any of the regional offices. What can be found is a partial list that was sent by the Ministry of Agriculture. The critical point that

<sup>21</sup>The regional state land administration and use proclamation number 85/2010.

stands out from such a trend is that the regional government is either unable or unwilling to take any steps towards ensuring that benefits from such agricultural investments actually accrue to the regional state and its people. For instance, this was manifested in the recent assessment of agricultural investment projects within the region, undertaken by the regional government, where those investment projects that were allotted land by the federal government were not part of the assessment report. In this respect, informants from regional authorities mentioned that the assessment team excluded land deals administered by the federal government and instead focused only on projects that have acquired land through the regional government. This demonstrates inherent asymmetries in political power that exists between the regional state and the federal government, the latter having undisputed sway. This apparently contradicts decentralized political power and decision-making in rural land administrations, although this is the desire clearly stipulated in the land administration proclamations both by federal and regional governments. As a result, local and regional authorities have now exerted no or very little influence over substantial land deals administered by the federal government that could have considerable impact on local land uses and biodiversity. In addition, the existing trend shows the absence of a unified monitoring and evaluation system put in place for the land investment projects.

While it has been accepted to some extent that the regional state does not have strong institutional capacity to effectively coordinate and administer its land and other natural resources, the current trend of administering land by centralized federal government bureaucracies complicated the process and created adverse consequences, and thus it seems a hegemonic representation of the regional state and its people. It would have been sound and convincing had it been the federal government that embarked on building and strengthening existing regional institutions through the provision of continuous capacity building trainings and technologies to strengthen its organizational infrastructure. In this regard, this study found that, so far, only a ten-day short training course on the application of GPS technology and data processing has been organized by AISD of the Ministry of Agriculture for land administration personnel recruited from *woreda*, zonal and regional offices.

The hegemonic representation of the regional state by the federal government as well as the regional trends exhibited so far, particularly in terms of land allocation processes, is based, I argue, on the premise and the historically rooted prejudice that indigenous ethnic groups of the region are backward and their traditional practices are impediments to accelerated utilization of available natural resources. This assertion overwhelmingly resulted in the misrepresentation and exclusion of local communities and authorities from participating in the identification, delineation and transfer of substantial land to investors, although this process could have an enormous impact on them. This is not in fact an exception to the historical relations of exploitation and marginalization of indigenous people such as the Gumuz and other groups who inhabited lowland areas in the borderlands which were once sources of ivory, gold and slaves. These historical relations have greatly influenced the socio-economic and political positions of different ethnic groups of the region, which are still visible when compared with other highland regions. Historically, Benishangul-Gumuz is a region that for centuries has suffered from the encroachment of Ethiopian highlanders as well as Sudanese states (Pankhurst 1977, Gebre 2003, Abbute 2002). As described by Zewde (2008c: 273) “for the Ethiopian highlanders, the lowlands long signified

little more than a natural hunting ground for elephants and slaves, and a source of tribute more raided than collected". Although the region has now been recognized as an autonomous region endowed with significant power since 1991, increasing trends of administering investment lands by the centralized federal body has greatly undermined the role and influence of the regional state over decision-making on its land resources.

This study however argues that despite the fact that the power and authority of the regional state generally has been undermined by the undisputed sway of the federal government over the administration of substantial investment land, it still needs meaningful and effective capacity-building supports from the federal government to enable the state to fully exercise the constitutional guarantee of administering its land and other natural resources. It is important to note that given the prevailing politics of decentralization, federal government offices have neither the legitimacy nor the local knowledge and capacity to effectively administer land deals in remote areas on the borderlands and cannot provide contextualized responses to land-related local issues that arise. What actually resulted from direct federal government involvement in the formal land deals is indeed a confusion and overlaps with regional state level authority. These conflicts over procedures and processes leave fault lines that could be seized by some interest groups taking advantage out of it. This trend would in fact pose threats to the territorial rights of indigenous local communities as well as to the environment as shown in the section that follows.

## **6 The Implications of Land Acquisitions for Local Livelihoods and the Environment**

While the country in general is categorized as one of the most land constrained countries in Africa, very few of its regions still have relatively abundant land that can be used for sustainable cultivation. Benishangul-Gumuz region is one of these few areas that provides such opportunities for the expansion of cultivated land, provided that due recognition is given to its distinct land-use practices of different ethnic groups and its fragile ecological contexts. Significant numbers of investors have acquired land across the region that was once viewed as peripheral and neglected during the previous successive political regimes. However, despite its claims to generate high economic and social returns through increased levels of rural employment, improved local infrastructure, skill and technology transfer and food security, the rising land acquisitions have been causing significant adverse impacts on local land-use practices and land resources including land dispossession, declining access to resources and enormous environmental destruction. This section demonstrates how current land acquisitions have created adverse impacts on local livelihoods and the environment.

### ***6.1 Land Dispossession and Declining Access to Land Resources***

One of the major adverse implications that stand out as the result of current land acquisitions is the loss of local land rights and land-use practices. As already indicated, most of the indigenous ethnic groups in the region mainly depend on shifting cultivation. Berta and Gumuz people, who are the dominant groups in the region, as well as Mao and Komo, are shifting cultivators who practice slash

andburn agriculture. Natural resources have been the source of basic livelihoods to the people, providing a common ground for gathering forest foods, hunting, fishing, honey collection and traditional alluvial gold mining. Among the Gumuz, land resources are ideally communal property in which rights to these resources are derived from the community. In their customary communal tenure system, patrilineal kin groups or clans own all resources inside the clan territory marked by land features such as rivers, hills, big trees, roads and footpaths. Decisions regarding the overall utilization of natural resources are made by the community, while individual members possess only usufruct rights. However, recent increases in land acquisitions have been affecting this traditional system, which in turn has resulted in the deprivation of the rights of local people from accessing their traditional source of livelihoods. The Gumuz, who originally and predominantly inhabited the Metekel area, have continuously suffered from encroachments by different interest groups across political regimes. In addition to the impacts of the long established encroachment by the highlanders, state-sponsored resettlement schemes and state farm expansions have deprived the Gumuz from practicing their traditional livelihood activities and pushed them further down to the peripheral lowlands. Rapidly emerging trends of land acquisitions for commercial agricultural investment have created additional challenges exerting intensified pressures on them. Gumuz farmers overwhelmingly perceive land acquisitions by investors as inimical to their local livelihoods and the environment. Although land scarcity is not a problem, at least for the moment, the Gumuz in all study *kebeles* unvaryingly sense that this will soon become a reality due to enclosures of large land resources that were used under their traditional system. A Gumuz farmer from Qotta Kebele, for example, explained how:

*There are six investors who have acquired land in our kebele. These investors claimed very large tracts of land, leaving our village in the middle. For example, one investor [S & P Energy Solutions] alone took 50,000 hectares of land. You can imagine how much land is left for us? As we are totally encircled by these investors, we don't have hope to expand our farm lands and continue practicing our traditional farming practices such as fallowing as we used to do in the past before the arrival of investors. As to my knowledge, the farmlands of ten households have been taken by one of these investors. We are now left with little land and we are very much worried for our children. Due to this situation we are even forced to keep our goats within the village and at the margins of our crop fields. Because of this our goats often encroach into crop fields causing damages to our planted crops. In the past, we used to keep our animals in the fields located in the opposite direction from cultivated lands of the village community, but this is no longer possible.*

According to the expert in Guba Woreda Agriculture Office, normally in the process of land allocations, some effort has been exerted to protect villages. The lands allocated to investors must be beyond a five-kilometer radius from villages, even though this is quite limited as farmers are shifting cultivators and also depend on multi-niche livelihood sources accessed from the forest.

As part of their customary land practices, local people do not cultivate their fields for a long period of time. They cultivate a field for 3-5 years and then they leave it fallow when the yields declined. Within the clan territory, a new land is then cleared and farmed in the same way until the yield starts to decline. In the process, all or part of the village could also be abandoned if the newly acquired lands are far away

from current villages. However, they do not actually move to new places all the time, but rather move around and return back to their abandoned lands that were left for regeneration. Now, however, this land practice is changing, owing to increases in land acquisitions. In interviews, farmers indicated that the lands that have been laying fallow, abandoned villages and forestlands are now largely converted into permanent farmlands by investors. A Gumuz farmer in his late-30s from Qotta Kebele explains how the situation has changed:

*We are told by the government that we should stay in permanent village farming fields close to our villages so that we will be provided with schools, health posts and water pumps. Recently, a lot of people have been relocated to our village from various scattered places and these households were allotted with small plots of land for their survival by the kebele. Due to this situation, we cannot continue practicing our traditional farming practices anymore unless we totally move to very remote areas that could not be reached easily and not suitable for their cars [tractors].*

Another farmer, who has been recently relocated to a newly established village under the regional government's ongoing program of villagization in which scattered small villages are collected into stable settlements, expressed his sentiments:

*It is too bad! ...land was abundant in the place where I was living before we were relocated to this village. If you are strong, you can clear and cultivate as much land as you can. Here, they gave me a piece of land because there is not much land left for us here. In any direction you go from this village you will encounter investors' land. I was about to go back to my previous village, but one of the investors who has been there for the last 2 years has now taken over all our previous lands. We want our land back. As a Gumuz, it is land that we have. Now, we are aware that the campaign of collecting our people into big settlements along the main road is to take our lands out of our hands and give it away to investors. Nobody cares about us. Nobody! What did these investors do for us since they came here? Nothing! What we have seen is destruction, nothing else.*

According to the regional government's villagization plan for 2011/2012, it envisaged to settle 19,763 households from their scattered settlements to stable villages across most of the *woredas* within the region. In the current study areas of Dangur Woreda and Guba Woreda alone, the government has planned to settle nearly 3,000 households into 14 permanent centers by displacing them from their scattered small villages.<sup>22</sup> A regional government official who requested anonymity expressed that while the major objective of the villagization program is to deliver basic infrastructure and services to rural communities more efficiently, which will facilitate their socio-economic transformation, there has been an implicit objective of making the expansion of commercial agricultural investments smooth through 'planned relocations', as most of these households inhabited large expanses of underutilized lands. Indeed, as the account above demonstrated, relocated Gumuz farmers were quite explicit in indicating that most of their previous lands have already been transferred to investors and the remaining will also inevitably be given away soon as well. In interviews, some resettled farmers complained that the provision of infrastructures and services has been very minimal in the newly

<sup>22</sup>Benishangul-Gumuz regional state villagization plan for 2011/2012 or for fiscal year 2004 Ethiopian Calendar.



resettled villages, and thus challenged the motives behind the program. One farmer who lives in the new village created under the current villagization program in Ayicid Kebele (Guba Woreda) explained the situation:

*We came to this new village not because of our consent. The woreda officials instructed us to leave our previous village. Initially we tried to refuse asking the officials: why do we need to leave from the place where we are living happily? Why are you forcing us? The officials told us that this is an order from the federal government which we cannot refuse and threatened us to accept. They said: If you refuse, we will bring the federal police forces so that you will face the consequences. It was because of this high pressure that we decided to leave. Finally, we complied with the order of the government but after we came here we are now faced with a lot of problems. Especially the lack of water is a serious problem. Even we managed to construct the houses that you see here from the materials that we brought from our previous villages by demolishing our previous houses. We are not even provided with water facilities as they promised. For your surprise, women now fetch water from our previous village as it is not far from here.*

The displacement of local communities from their homes and lands leading to a loss of access to their basic resources has emerged as a result of the increasing land acquisitions. These adverse processes tend to threaten the integrity of indigenous people's communities in many aspects, including hampering local traditional forms of economic practices. Local people for instance perceived current trends as being inimical to the destruction of their traditional farming economy. As the field investigation suggests, the threats of displacements have been on the rise in the region. For example, the land deal committed between Tracon Trading and the federal government involving 5,000 hectares of land in Dangur Woreda is said to displace the whole village not only from their cultivated lands but also from their homes. This occurred due to the fact that the allocation of the land was carried out based on the analysis of satellite imagery of the area without undertaking proper verification of the information. This is a typical manifestation of current trends in direct federal government intervention in the appropriation of land belonging to local communities. This situation was explained by an official from the woreda council:

*Although not based on detailed field studies, there exists large unused land in this woreda which can be developed for commercial agriculture. The available investment land in most of the kebeles is transferred to the federal land bank and maps of these lands have already been prepared by the federal government based on satellite images. The trend is that normally investors come to us with the map of the allocated land and then actual work of the transfer is carried out based on the coordinates obtained from the maps. But this process has been creating a lot of mess. For instance, during the actual work of transferring the coordinate points into exact locations on the ground, major problems have been encountered including overlaps on existing cultivated lands, settlements, forest and protected areas as well as on lands already transferred to investors by the regional government. This was the case with regard to the land transferred to Tracon Trading, to mention one as an example. The transferred land was not actually unoccupied land. The whole Dachigeri Kebele, including settlements and cultivated lands, fall within the land areas transferred. Due to this, the woreda council intervened to address the problem, at least for now. The decision was that the affected communities shall continue staying on their current place for this year and by next year, after they have collected their harvest, the*

*communities will be relocated to another nearby place. The company has been allowed to start developing part of the land which is currently not cultivated by the kebele community until the whole village is moved to another location.*

The *woreda* official further explained that most of the investors who came to the *woreda* through the federal government came with the maps falling in Qotta Kebele for reasons he did not understand. This complication not only created overlaps with cultivated lands of local communities but also a lot of overlaps between many lands transferred to investors leading to several land disputes. Within Qotta Kebele, about fourteen peasants lost their cultivated lands and none of them received any compensation for the loss, nor were they given other land. As expressed by local informants and also confirmed by the *kebele* Administrator, many other farmers are currently cultivating lands already allocated to investment projects, and these farmers are being told that they will leave immediately after this harvest season. The field observation and discussions with community members also revealed that track roads leading to the various investment projects pass through farmlands of some farmers and have caused some damages to their cultivated land. The situation caused a lot of frustration and insecurity among the local communities of the *kebele* due to its clear implication for heightened pressure on the available land and other natural resources. For that reason, in interviews and discussions, many farmers of the *kebele* who felt that they are at high risk of having their land taken away from them and who are aware of the disappearance of their once abundant land resources, indicated that they want all investors to leave and thus, persistently appealed to *kebele* authorities. From Gimtiya Kebele, community leaders estimated that about thirty farmers lost their farmlands because of the investment projects.

Additionally, the fieldwork in Homosha Woreda revealed that the farmland of eight Berta farmers was taken over by one of the domestic investors, Balzaf Alcohol and Drinks Factory Plc, which has acquired 1,031 hectares of land in Tsori Al Metema Kebele. Similar to the Gumuz farmers in Qotta Kebele indicated above, these eight Berta farmers were not also given any compensation. Generally, what makes the indigenous ethnic groups more vulnerable possibly relates to the fact that neither their customary land rights have been respected, nor are their use rights formally registered.<sup>23</sup> In spite of this, farmers interviewed assert that they do not feel insecure because of their existing customary land tenure system; rather they indicated that the increasing land investments have resulted in uncertainties about their traditional land rights.

In circumstances that involved overlaps and evictions, local authorities have generally tended to intervene in favor of investors and, when the disputes are between investors, the demands of those investors who have acquired land through the federal government prevailed over those investors granted land by the regional government. This has been illustrated by the case of Dachigeri Kebele where the displacement of the whole village is deemed inevitable, but only postponed until next year. Farmers in Qotta Kebele, who are cultivating lands already allocated to investors, are also helplessly waiting for their imminent eviction, which is now scheduled for next year. Related to this, one farmer from Ayicid Kebele explained how the situation appears unfair:

<sup>23</sup>Unlike other regions, for instance Amhara region, land registration and certification has not been undertaken in Benishangul-Gumuz regional state and thus traditional land tenure systems are still widely practiced.

*I was in a dispute with one investor over land. The head of the investment project insisted and tried to convince me that the land belongs to them. I was so upset about their claim. It was only monkeys which were here when our fathers and grand fathers first came here. How could people who came now insist that the land belongs to them? I had to present the case to kebele authorities, but immediately I was told that the land has been allocated for investment purposes.*

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Generally the local communities as well as local government authorities appear powerless to contest land deals committed by the federal government. This has been problematic to defend local land claims and engage in negotiations that protect land rights of local people.

More than anything else, the considerable environmental destruction in recent years attributed to commercial land investments across the region is deeply troubling. The arbitrary nature of land allocations to investors implemented without the necessary detailed socio-cultural, economic, and ecological studies has been causing adverse impacts on the environmental and natural resources. The ultimate effect of this situation is considerable negative impact on indigenous local communities whose livelihoods heavily depend on natural resources. Contrasting to widespread concerns and initiatives towards addressing environmental degradation in highland parts of the country, current trends in land investments in the region associated with the allocation and utilization of land resources reveal that no attention has been paid to its impacts on the environment. Information obtained from the regional bureau for environmental protection, land administration and use shows that none of the numerous investment projects scattered throughout the region carried out assessments of the environmental soundness of their projects. Interestingly, not even a single environmental impact assessment document was found in the responsible offices.

All Gumuz and Berta informants were deeply irritated by the ways in which the indigenous natural forests have been cleared for preparing farm fields. The informants contended that vast areas covered with forests have been indiscriminately cleared and, in addition, fire has been used intentionally for burning some standing trees so that they will never regenerate. The farmers have already started feeling its effects including declines in the availability of forest food sources and deterioration of livelihoods. Alongside and supplementary to their shifting cultivation, forests have provided traditional food items for the Gumuz which include plant shoots, roots, leaves and fruits. Although they hardly received food aid, informants indicated that there has been growing need in recent years due to the deteriorating local livelihood sources that traditionally provided safety nets during the few months of food shortages. Actually, wild forest foods are not only consumed whenever crop failure or food shortages occur, but also consumed as part of a vital daily diet. Women informants explained that before the arrival of investors and the resultant deforestation and enclosures, wild edible leaves such as *Kaakima* and roots like *Echa* and *Cici* were easily collected at short distance, but this is no longer easy. Instead women are now required to travel far from the villages to gather these forest foods. The same informants complained that some species that are only available in particular areas have been disappearing. Nor could the remaining once accessed due to enclosures. Among the Gumuz, women perform numerous livelihood activities – more than their male counterparts. In addition to full participation in farming

activities in the field, women shoulder the key responsibility of feeding the family on a daily basis. Indeed, the deterioration of local livelihood sources is more likely to worsen their situation.

The disappearance of some wild animals was also noted by the informants. As one informant in Dangur stated:

*We were able to get abundant wild animals to be hunted at a short distance. But after we have been invaded by these investors, the animals started to disappear and moved to the remaining remote forested areas. I tell you, we will not see a single Guanja here by next year.<sup>24</sup>*

In interviews, experts as well as *woreda*, zonal and regional authorities unanimously confirmed the enormous and rapidly increasing trend of environmental destruction caused by land investments. Admittedly, the informants underscored that the lack of an appropriate land-use plan developed on the basis of detailed economic, socio-cultural, agronomic and environmental studies has contributed to the present state of affairs. A land-use plan for the region upon which decisions regarding land-use and management would be based has not been prepared yet. A widespread perception of land availability throughout the region tended to undermine efforts towards efficient utilization of land and natural resources. This notion has led to the process of land allocations based neither on the classification of existing land uses, nor on genuine participation of local communities in the process and thus, very little attention is paid to protecting settlements, existing cultivated lands as well as forests and protected areas that sustain environmental services and local livelihoods.

It appears that much focus has been put on attracting many investors into the region as much as possible while concerns regarding potential implications currently seem off the agenda and possibly postponed until the consequences are deeply felt.

Natural resource management experts interviewed at the *woreda* and regional offices indicated that vast expanses of land covered by indigenous forest species that have economic values and that provide environmental services including lowland bamboo, incense tree, gum tree and *Zobi* have been cleared during the ongoing indiscriminate act of deforestation. For example, the lowland bamboo tree, which is widely available in the region, is traditionally used by local people for a wide range of purposes including construction of houses, fences, cattle barns, baskets, furniture (stools, chairs, etc), granaries, tools, traditional beehives, traditional musical instruments and as firewood.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, its sprouts serve as an important source of food. Moreover, scientifically lowland bamboo trees are said to have high carbon sequestration capacity providing critical ecological services. Despite its enormous importance, extensive areas of land covered by bamboo vegetation have been allocated to investors leading to its destruction. Contentiously, through the federal government, 3000 hectares of land with thick bamboo vegetation was recently allotted to the domestic investor, Kehedem Trading, within Guba Woreda. The allotted land is located in Ayicid Kebeleon the left side of the main road from Gublak to Mankush and bordered by Beles River on the other side. According to informants, the area was designated as protected forest

<sup>24</sup> *Guanja* is the local name of one of the commonly hunted animals by the Gumuz for food. Its equivalent name in Amharic is Midaqua and Duiker in English.

<sup>25</sup> The stem cover of bamboo is used in roofing and the construction of traditional beehives. The hollow bamboo is also used for making traditional musical instruments widely used among the indigenous local communities, while cups used for drinking coffee and water jars are made out of the stem (culms) cut into small pieces.

land because of its rich bamboo vegetation cover and wildlife biodiversity. The experts further stressed that the land was not actually suitable for commercial agriculture and its feasibility is deeply questioned due to the nature of the landscape. For these reasons, the transfer of the land was highly contested by local inhabitants, experts as well as *woreda* authorities. Unfortunately, such local efforts were unable to save the contested forest land from appropriation, although the investor has not yet started clearing the bamboo vegetation. As the fieldwork for this particular study was underway, there was a widely circulating rumor among experts and *woreda* and zonal authorities related to the transfer of the area which is under the process to formally delineate it as a park because of its rich woodland, water and wildlife resources. This area which is now under rumor covers large areas both in Dangur and Guba Woredas and also bordered by Alatish Park in Quara of Amhara regional state, the boundary being marked by Ayima River. Local and regional authorities now seem determined to resist the transfer of this reserved land if the rumor is real. Nonetheless, as recent trends suggest, it is unlikely that such local efforts will successfully dispute such land transfers involving the federal government, as shown in their inability to bring to attention recent similar transfers in Ayicid and Dachigeri Kebele.

As most of the land allocations have been carried out without appropriate feasibility studies, forested areas that are not suitable for cultivation, particularly for mechanized farming, were transferred to investors. As a result, some of the investors who acquired the unsuitable lands ceased cultivation after clearing large areas covered by natural forests. For example, all along the road from Mankush to Almahal town in Guba Woreda, as observed during the fieldwork, six to eight investors abandoned the land they were allotted after clearing away its thick forest cover and cultivating for one agricultural season or so. Strikingly, these investors have already acquired new lands as replacements in other *kebeles* within the same *woreda*. In Guba Woreda, areas covered by naturally grown incense and gum trees have been also allocated to investment projects disregarding their high economic values for local communities and the country.<sup>26</sup> Such uninformed practices of land allocations that have indiscriminately given out large expanses of forestlands to investors is more likely to create adverse impacts on the natural environment and thus on local livelihoods. The clear negligence that has been documented so far with regard to protecting forested areas is particularly distressing, and this and other similar cases exhibited in this study are the manifestations of the hegemonic character of current land allocations.

Additionally, the ways in which the allocated land has been used and managed by investors also raised sustainability concerns. According to the experts interviewed, most of the investors have been utilizing their land without preparing sound and efficient land-use plans to ensure that the land is utilized in an environmentally sustainable way. Some of the elements that need to be carefully considered while developing the land include distance from water bodies and gullies, the number of trees to be left per hectare and slope of the land. However, these criteria are rarely met. Recently, for example the way in which the domestic investor, Balzaf Alcohol and Liquor Plc, has been utilizing its leased land in Homosha Woreda was criticized by the Ethiopian Parliament standing committee on environmental matters after

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<sup>26</sup>Despite this, within Guba Woreda about 37,000 hectares of land covered by natural plantations of incense and gum trees have been granted to three domestic investors to harvest incense and natural gum for domestic and export markets. The companies include Ethiopian Gums and Incense Enterprise (12,000ha), Beles Plc (15,000ha), and Meskerem Natural Gum and Incense Enterprise (10,000ha). Generally, some *woredas* of the region such as Guba, Kurmuk, Sherhole, and Sirba Abay are endowed with naturally growing incense and gum trees.

their field visit to the area. Moreover, some investors have been blamed for failing to use the land for intended objectives. Informants in Dangur, Guba, and Homosha Woredas indicated that some investors have been engaged in the production of timber and charcoal, even though such activities are illegal. In this regard, the official interviewed at the regional capital admittedly mentioned that there were times in which few investors even came to ask permission to transport the charcoal they have produced to the towns for sale. Similarly, the representative of one of the NGOs working in the region also confirmed that some investors make charcoal while local inhabitants are being told to refrain from such activities.

## 6.2 Land Disputes and Local Reactions

As this study has tried to show, the threat of increasing trends of land acquisitions to rural livelihoods has been increasing. Although the land rights and natural resources-based livelihoods of local communities have been under pressure from encroachments by highlanders, state-sponsored resettlement schemes and state farms over the past several decades (Abbute 2002, Gebre 2003), the pressure is now increasing as more and more land is given out to commercial agricultural investments, particularly in the last few years. This in turn is resulting in land disputes and contestations between local communities, the state and investors. Nonetheless under existing conditions of weak bargaining power of local communities, the interests of those who have the power to manipulate institutional and administrative frameworks always prevailed. Particularly, the Gumuz are the overlooked losers in the process.

In interviews and discussions with local individuals and groups, it was indicated that there have been increased disputes over the dispossession of cultivated lands and access to water associated with land investment projects. However, the informants underscored how powerless they are in defending their rights due to the strong politicization of the land investment undertakings, which now involved the federal government. In this regard, the federal government was viewed as an entity that is impossible to dispute, and this has made informants fearful. Similar views were also reflected among local and regional authorities, though in a muted form, over their reduced influence in relation to land allocations. Despite this, several scattered disputes were exhibited and local communities generally reflected negative attitudes towards investors operating in their surroundings. One informant in Gublak (Dangur Woreda) indicated that because of disputes and bad interactions with the local communities, some farm machineries of Jaba Agro-Industry Plc were deliberately burnt last year. According to the informants, it was suspected that the fire was deliberately set by the local community. Similarly, in Belojiganfoy Woreda about 700 hectares of land covered by maize ready for harvest was destroyed by fire, which the investor accused the local community for deliberately setting the fire. Local communities generally viewed investment projects inimical to their traditional land-use practices and land resources-based livelihoods. According to the regional official interviewed at Assosa, disputes related to land investments have been particularly widespread within Yaso Woreda and Belojiganfoy Woreda. Information obtained from reports reveals that within these two *woredas* there are many cases of boundary overlaps between land used by local communities and investors, leading to frequent disputes. It was reported that on average about 100 peasants have encroached on the land already allotted to investors in Belojiganfoy Woreda alone. The major causes indicated for this problem include guesstimate and lack of community participations in the land allocation processes, and local sentiments over the protection of ancestral

land resources. Disputes over boundaries have also been common between investors because of the absence of clear demarcation of their boundaries since traditional landmarks that are amenable to different interpretations such as rivers, hills, big trees, mountains, and roads, have been used as boundary markers. Woreda authorities indicated that the arbitration of disputes between investors has become a complex task to handle and time-taking.

Competition over access to water is also a source of discontent among local communities. According to informants in Qotta Kebele (Dangur Woreda), potable water sources developed by government have been overexploited by investment projects, further exacerbating the already serious water scarcity problems of the community. Within the *kebele*, as observed during the fieldwork, there was only one hand-dug shallow water well with a hand pump that has been serving simultaneously both the local inhabitants and investment projects. From this single source, a large volume of potable water is fetched and transported everyday to their camps by the employees of investment projects, putting stress on the limited water supply. The informants furiously complained about the situation, particularly women who normally shoulder the responsibility of fetching water and who face abuses by the employees of the projects every day. Similar problems were also indicated by the informants in Ayicid Kebele (Guba Woreda). As a result, competition over access to potable water has already become a source of frequent disputes between the local communities and investment projects in these *kebeles* in addition to land disputes. According to the administrator of Qotta Kebele, they once tried to ban investors from accessing the water well, which was dug by the government for the local communities, but federal police forces stationed at Qotta Megentiya, seven kilometers away came and ordered them to lift the ban. Furthermore, local communities in the two *kebeles* indicated that the traditional beehives of some farmers were destroyed by the investment projects during the clearing activities of the forest, and some villagers also mentioned that there were instances in which their goats were stolen and slaughtered by the employees of the projects. The investors were also alleged for damaging harvested crop piles of community members by the fire they set for the purpose of clearing the debris of forests cut down, without taking the necessary precautions. The combination of all these adverse impacts on local communities is stirring hostilities towards the investment projects with the likelihood of potential conflicts. Some angry farmers, particularly in Qotta Kebele, even threatened not to pay taxes to the government, implying that the emerging hostilities are not only directed towards the investors but also to the government as well. The consequences of the land investments now appear much more in some *kebeles* of the study areas, Qotta being one of them. The administrator of Qotta Kebele particularly stressed that all the grievances of the community are directed to him and in return, he tried to voice the concerns of the communities through writing letters frequently to the *woreda* authorities and also raised the concerns in various official meetings. Also in Homosha Woreda, the investment project of Balzaf Alcohol and Drinks Plc was also alleged for burning coffee plantations of some Berta farmers. The main reason for this, as indicated by the farmers interviewed, was the lack of respect among investors for local communities.

It is also interesting to note that investment projects almost totally depended on agricultural labourers recruited from other regions of the country, particularly from the Amhara region. As the jobs are mostly

seasonal in nature, many of the labourers resorted to stay in the area after the completion of their contracts. They tend to encroach into the forest to acquire land so that after cultivating for a year or so they in due course bring their families. The creation of such kinds of “illegal” settlements has been generating additional challenges for local communities, intensifying the pressure on available land resources. This has been the case mainly in Dangur and also Guba *woredas*, in which the *woreda* authorities have now considered it as a major peace and security challenge to the area, as this will more likely fuel land conflicts.

Generally, the Gumuz are developing negative attitudes and hostilities towards the investment projects not only because they perceived it as being instrumental in the destruction of their traditional land-use practices and the natural environment, but also they saw no economic and social benefits from the projects, nor are they optimistic of any future discernible benefits.

Although it has been widely argued by the government that the land investments will offer many economic and social benefits to local communities, currently almost no or very little benefits accrued to the communities studied. As already demonstrated, with the exception of a few guard positions, almost all seasonal wage employment opportunities have been filled by labourers from the highland areas, mainly from the Amhara region. Few Gumuz and Berta people have been hired as guards in some of the investment projects. According to the Manager of one investment project in Gimitiya Kebele (Dangur Woreda), they have been forced to bring labourers from other regions because of the lack of interest among the local communities to engage in the laborious seasonal activities. Contrary to this claim, however, in the interviews and discussions, most of the Gumuz and Berta farmers expressed their interest in participating in the employment opportunities. Women in particular stressed that when they tried to approach the investment projects for employment, they were treated suspiciously and even the employers viewed them as thieves who went there not to work but to steal.

Notwithstanding this, Indian-based investment company, S&P Energy Solutions, constructed three additional rooms to the existing health clinic in Qotta Kebele. The company also currently feeds students of the school during lunch time as most of the students come from distant places to attend classes. A grain mill was also provided to the Dachigeri Kebele community by one domestic investor, although the inhabitants complained that the mill is not yet functional due to the reason that the investor was not willing to install it as promised. Community members of Tsori-al-metema Kebele (Homosha Woreda) also indicated that the domestic investor, Balzaf Alcohol and Liquor Plc, had provided them a few sport uniforms and footballs for the youth.



## 7 Conclusions

As this study has tried to demonstrate, considerable land acquisitions have occurred at a significant scale throughout the region, particularly in Dangur and Guba Woredas, while the land rights and natural resource-based livelihoods of indigenous local communities have been subverted in the process. The amount of land already transferred to domestic and foreign investors both by the regional and federal government has now reached about 390,590 hectares and recent trends further suggest that the transfer will more likely increase in the future, as much land has been already earmarked for this purpose. Existing contradictions in the land allocation processes suggest the tendency for indigenous local communities to be displaced from their land resources, and their livelihoods disrupted, stirring land contestations. The process has led to simultaneous destruction of local traditional farming economies and the environment, and thus poses apparent threats to the economic and cultural survival of indigenous communities. The ongoing land allocation process that is largely predicated on the perception of abundant 'unoccupied' land availability in the region overlooked traditional land-use practices and social relations of local communities that are rooted in their traditions. Under this misguided notion, the land on which shifting cultivation has been practiced by the Gumuz and Berta ethnic groups is being treated as unoccupied land and in so doing; such lands have been transferred to investors for permanent forms of land use. As there is an inherent difference between various groups who arguably assign different meanings and values to existing local land uses, the concern should not be so much on the claim that there exists abundant land resources, but rather on the ways through which the available lands have been identified, delineated and transferred. Despite substantial land transfers, genuine community consultations and participation were not part of the land allocation process. Instead hegemonic representations by the regional and federal government prevailed as expressed in terms of power exercised in favor of commercial land investments through the manipulation of existing institutional and administrative frameworks over the allocation of land resources. As a result, local communities have been facing not only the dispossession of their cultivated lands, but also displacement from their homes, often under the guise of villagization which is smoothing out the ground for more dispossession. The ongoing land acquisitions have also entailed the outright grabbing of traditional land resources, which the local communities had accessed to eke out their diverse means of livelihoods. In the process, the integrity of their local traditional forms of economic practices is being threatened. Most significantly, the practice tended to haphazardly allocate forest lands, which had sustained ecological services and provided the traditional source of livelihoods, for commercial agricultural developments. Additionally, it appears that the land already transferred has been utilized in an environmentally unsustainable manner, as in most of the cases the lands are being used without the necessary land-use plans.

What has now become more apparent is that the impact of land allocations is seldom the focus of much attention, rather greatly based on dewy-eyed optimism. Notwithstanding this, to all those genuinely concerned for the protection of the rights of the weakly organized indigenous local communities as well as the environment within the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, this lack of attention should not be overlooked.

As the evidence in this study reveals, the role of local and regional state authorities in relation to land allocation has been greatly undermined because of the prevailing direct intervention by the federal government. It appears that increasing direct involvement of the federal government has been regarded by the regional authorities with mixed feelings of awe in which it is partly welcomed as a contribution to expand land investments, on the one hand, and a reduced role for the regional state over decisions regarding its land resources, on the other. The contestations that emerge over land resources and authority show the nature of political (and economic) power relations that exist between the federal government and the regional states in which it is redefined in some strategic areas in a federal context. In this case, it appears that the federal government could not devolve authority to regional states in practice as has been the case regarding the administration of investment lands, despite the constitutional provision that devolves power over land resources to regional states.

A critical look at the reality on the ground so far reveals that indigenous local communities have not benefited from the increasing land investments, although a considerable number of agricultural workers coming seasonally from other regions, mainly from the Amhara region, have been benefiting from the wage employment opportunities. In this regard, the land investments encouraged the in-migration of mainly landless agricultural labourers from other land scarce regions, resulting in increased pressure on local land resources as the workers often tended to stay after the completion of their contracts. It is therefore necessary for the government to fundamentally rethink land-use management in order to attend to local concerns before the current trend, whose short-term or long-term impacts have not been critically considered as yet, result in disastrous long-term effects on the local communities and the natural environment.

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Annex1: Some of the Key Informant and Focus Group Discussion Participants from the local community

Gimitya Kebele	Dachigeri Kebele	Qotta Kebele	Ayicid Kebele	Mankush Kebele (Yabulu Gott)
Belena Megie	Abbas Jarra	Mestofa Ousman	Korfet Lampecha	Army Hussien
Bewuket Tersho	Lulie Bemet	Kuali Mekete	Police Merdassa	Hassen Essa
Ousman Sherif	Derg Ali	Abdulaziz Dawud	Shawe Beka	Getnet Hussien
Hamdali Admas	Bedika Benai	Kuali Shidie	Abdela Garad	Areffa Ismael
Bulule Beagn	Bawude Kunjari	Beji Bondie	Abdi Oumer	Hassen Police
Endi Megie	Mekka Bawude	Juma Guguie	Dushi Ambaw	Nadia Kumsari
Bewudie Anjinach	Zever Shaib	Tadesse Kelu	Mengesha Yassin	Ibrahim Yusuf
Haji Fele		Shidie Bagneh	Yigzaw Shawe	Mulu Sebet
Bugie Fencha		Mango Maka	Mulugeta Mohammed	Awot Teshale
Gahun Gawo		Fatima Alefehal	Semeq Merdassa	Yusuf Hussein
			Liqu Abera	Ibrahim Ahmed
			Mestofa Kurfet	Ismael Siyag
			Ahmed Merdassa	Zekeriya Abubker
			Sawa Bahul	

The name of other informants including experts and public officials who requested anonymity for understandable reasons has been withheld.



**Annex2: Partial List of Land Transfers by the Regional Government (Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State)**

S.No	Investor/Project name	Zone	Woreda	Kebele	Land Area in hectare	Land size developed so far in ha	Land transfer year
1	Molla Endeshaw Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	Guba	Ayinmshemish	624	172.2	
2	Tofik Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	"	434	106.5	
3	Asemeret Yeresaw Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	"	343	40.1	
4	Omedla Agricultural Development P.L.C	Metekel	"	"	564	56.8	
5	Hayat Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	"	515	81.97	
6	Salew Bahta Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	"	475	95.4	
7	Bejere Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	"	248	11.1	
8	Fisseha Zemichael Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	"	"	772	365.2	
9	Worku Ahmed Wedaje Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	"	217	115.4	
10	Selishi Adamu Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	"	"	395	155.3	
11	Yazezew Solomon Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	"	"	566	236.1	
12	Berhane Tesfaye Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	638	376.7	
13	Ferede Azanaw Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	"	Omedla	469	145.1	
14	Meriem Mohammed Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	310	81	
15	Alnur Beshar Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	294	87.1	
16	Tsega Aberham Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	383	142.5	
17	Balankore Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	Guba	Omedla	110	54	
18	Ayima Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	246	79.3	
19	Edeget Fana Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	322	101.7	
20	Omedla Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	-	76.8	
21	Gebeyehu Gola Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	-	512.8	

S.No	Investor/Project name	Zone	Woreda	Kebele	Land Area in hectare	Land size developed so far in ha	Land transfer year
22	Feyisel Bon Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	193		
23	Banbudi Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	231		
24	Nega Yemane Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	506	109.8	
25	Eyasu Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Omedla	340	80	
26	Tena Alemayehu Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Omedla	534		
27	Wuraye P.L.C	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	1728	244.5	
28	Mareg Agricultural Development P.L.C	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	550	359.5	
29	Tsegaw Mebratu Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	628	63.1	
30	Tsegay Gebru Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	524	91.9	
31	Mengistu Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	604	99.4	
32	Wujizera General Business P.L.C	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	1674	799.5	
33	Resekaye Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	561	158.6	
34	Bazezew Abera Agricultural Dev't	Metekel	Guba	Ablehorres	526	95	
35	Ablehorres Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	253	19	
36	Abdulaziz Hassen Agricultural Dev't	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	407	51.8	
37	Selam Livestock & Grain Development	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	215	75	
38	Hiwot Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	238	78.4	
39	Legudi Agricultural Development P.L.C	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	3341	1647.9	
40	Haji Oumer Mohammed Agricultural	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	576	138	
41	Andinet Kumer Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	507		
42	Endalkachew Semachew Agricultural	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	627	40	
43	Aluosira Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	322		
44	Y. ZM. S. Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	-		
45	Ousman Hajerguba Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	326	48.2	
46	Sumeya Kalid	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	306	42.8	
47	Tesfaye G/Selassie Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	319		
48	Oziyak Oxfam Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Bengo	3171	112.3	
49	Amared Industrial P.L.C	Metekel	"	Bengo	1050	33.4	
50	Wenbiro Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Bengo	-		

S.No	Investor/Project name	Zone	Woreda	Kebele	Land Area in hectare	Land size developed so far in ha	Land transfer year
51	Kabral Agricultural Development	Metekel	Guba	Bengo	945	97.6	
52	Muhammed Salah Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Bengo	197	80.4	
53	Jemal Ahmed Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Bengo	213	10	
54	T. T.Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	-	226.4	
55	Addisalem Agricultural Development Enterprise (Addisu)	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	-	140.4	
56	Amanuel Agricultural Development Ent.	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	-	12.2	
57	Dawit Teklay Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	-	9.5	
58	Muoze Yesihak Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	304	0	
59	Addis Alem Agricultural Development Enterprise (Ebabu)	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	252	11.3	
60	Jemal(Musefa) Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	255	62.9	
61	Aregawi Dimtsu Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	255	108.7	
62	WosfeSolomon Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	-		
63	Ayinet Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	1406	74.4	
64	Kefiyalew Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	255	60.7	
65	Essa Hassen Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	258	74	
66	Dawit Berhanu Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	288	0	
67	Bewal Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	500	140	
68	Wosfe Hassen Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	Guba	Wudlebahit	-	73.6	
69	Desatu Gemechu Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	410	24.9	
70	Guba Agricultural Development Ent.	Metekel	"	Wudlebahit	300	85.6	
71	Luwam Metekel Development Enterprise	Metekel	"	Ayichichi & Abulta	551	39.5	

S.No	Investor/Project name	Zone	Woreda	Kebele	Land Area in hectare	Land size developed so far in ha	Land transfer year
72	Amanuel Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayichichi & Abulta	340	0	
73	Aberham Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayichichi & Abulta	88	18	
74	Meakat Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayichichi & Abulta	760	157.3	
75	Mekuanint Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayichichi & Abulta	85	12.7	
76	Bamelak Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayichichi & Abulta	105	12.7	
77	Kokeb Livestock & Grain Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayichichi & Abulta	357	30.3	
78	Ayichichi Ayima Agricultural Dev't	Metekel	"	Ayichichi & Abulta	498	13.8	
79	Ekubay & Samuel Agricultural Dev't	Metekel	"	Almehal/Mankush	-	51.2	
80	Zeyrefeda Agro-industry Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Almehal/Mankush	506	75	
81	Muluneh Agricultural Development Almehal	Metekel	"	Almehal/Mankush	-		
82	EdigetBeteret Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Almehal/Mankush	330		
83	Nejat Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Almehal/Mankush	377	19.4	
84	Bamboo Trading P.L.C	Metekel	"	Almehal/Mankush	102		
85	Tena Alemayehu Agricultural Dev't	Metekel	Guba	Almehal/Mankush	248		
86	Lamida Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Almehal/Mankush	1500		
87	Fenote Selam Teke Agricultural Dev't	Metekel	"	Almehal/Mankush	1094	46.3	
88	Alem Kassahun (Metekel) Agricultural	Metekel	"	Babizenda	438	23.3	
89	Worku Baro (Bilen Worku) Agricultural	Metekel	"	Babizenda	200	17.7	
90	Firegedewa Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayicid	221	122.5	
91	Kidan Mariam Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	"	Ayicid	241		
92	Amu Amu Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayicid	700	237.9	
93	Enat Worqe	Metekel	"	Ayicid	550	236.5	
94	Ayicid Agro-Industry S. C.	Metekel	"	Ayicid	951		
95	Zemen Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayicid	330		
96	Mekonen Aberha Agricultural Dev't	Metekel	"	Ayicid	-		
97	H/Mariam Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ayicid	-		
98	Yohannes Teref Agricultural Dev't	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	-		
99	Seid Hussein Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	-		
100	Haile Agricultural Development	Metekel	"	Ablehorres	-		
101	Merab Ereshawoch Agricultural Dev't	Metekel	Dangur	Manbuk	652	0	
102	Deguay Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Manbuk	582	194.6	
103	Zelege Mechanized Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	Dangur	Qotta	7494		

S.No	Investor/Project name	Zone	Woreda	Kebele	Land Area in hectare	Land size developed so far in ha	Land transfer year
104	Yimam Seid Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Qotta	956		104
105	Winner Alula Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Dachigeri	475	35.4	105
106	Belaya Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Dachigeri	1500	355	106
107	H/Mariam Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Dachigeri	475	14.3	
108	Aberham Desta Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	Dangur	Dachigeri	645	197.4	
109	Mesi Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Dachigeri	2007		
110	Eyno Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Dilsambi	90		
111	Walta	Metekel	Dangur	Dilsambi	295		
112	Ayima Yegali Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Jaba	368		
113	Genet Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Jaba	51		
114	Galon Wonez Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Jaba	83		
115	Thalim Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Jaba	52		
116	Jeba Agro-Business Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	Dangur	Gimtiya	752	287.5	
117	Temamen Agricultural Development	Metekel	Dangur	Burje	1252	47	
118	Ahunim General	Metekel	Dangur	Burje	467	161	
119	H/Mariam Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	Pawe	Mender 4	108	38.1	
120	Teferi & Brothers Agricultural Dev.	Metekel	Pawe	Mender 17	824	34.2	
121	New Hope Agricultural Development Enterprise	Metekel	Pawe	Abat Beles	288		
122	Belaya Agricultural Development Ent.	Metekel	Pawe	Ketena 1-4	109	121.6	
123	Winner Alula Agricultural Development	Metekel	Pawe	Mender 4	108	21.8	
124	Selam Livestock & Fattening	Metekel	Pawe	Mender 23/45	185	38.1	
125	Abay Zuryia Agricultural Development	Metekel	Pawe	Mender 17	11	4.1	
126	Abe Agricultural Development Ent.	Metekel	Pawe	Mender 5	15.3	11	
127	Addis Lemat Agriculture & Trading	Metekel	Mandura	Dehansbaguna	371	93	
128	Eshete Ferede Agricultural Development	Metekel	Mandura	Tunidadush	117	24.1	
129	Baben Agro-Industry P.L.C	Metekel	Bulen	Dobi & Yeqonti	116	49.3	
130	S. S. Agricultural Development S.C	Metekel	Wonbera	Treshaga	500		
131	Wogegta General Trading	Assosa	Assosa	Bashabuda	136	60	
132	Alshahari Agricultural Development Ent	Assosa	Assosa	Atimebaqo	119	27.6	
133	Dereje Agricultural Development	Assosa	Assosa	Bashabuda	400	63	
134	Enzi Shederia Agricultural Development	Assosa	Assosa	Megele 29	11	5.5	
135	Fetan Ledeget Agricultural Development	Assosa	Assosa	Maremia Bet	17	14	
136	Iron Eagle Farm	Assosa	Assosa	Bashabuda	200	37	

S.No	Investor/Project name	Zone	Woreda	Kebele	Land Area in hectare	Land size developed so far in ha	Land transfer year
137	Walelegn Ketsela Agricultural Dev. Ent.	Assosa	Bambasi	Mutsa	45	24.5	
138	Mohammed Yassin Agricultural Development Enterprise	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	851	102.5	
139	Amare & Anteneh Agricultural Dev. Plc	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	956	223	
140	Juhar Mohammed	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	398	78	
141	Atenafu Agricultural Development	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	206	155	
142	Negash Agricultural Development	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	378	75	
143	Kassahun Atalay	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	78	70.8	
143	G/Michael G/Tsadik	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	408	184	
145	Alberka Agricultural Development	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	139	88	
146	Mohammed Hussein Hassen	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	94	39	
147	Yilma Amenu	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	137	63	
148	Kalid	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	160	35.3	
149	Awura	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	231	76	
150	Hope Agricultural Development	Assosa	Bambasi	Womba	40	4.4	
151	Genedabe	Assosa	Bambasi	Mutsa	633	228	
152	Jena Agricultural Development	Assosa	Bambasi	Shewabergosh	72	21.2	
153	Tesfaye Redai	Assosa	Bambasi	Mutsa	97	21	
154	Guteta Goshu	Assosa	Bambasi	Womba	170	25	
155	Muha Agro	Assosa	Bambasi	Womba	310	31	
156	Mohammed Seid	Assosa	Oda	Daleti	98	39	
157	Abera	Assosa	Oda	Dale	504	22	
158	Goitom Negussie	Assosa	Oda	Tuli	25	16	
159	Debas Zena	Assosa	Oda	Belfudi	500	75	
160	Habteseged	Assosa	Oda	Haile	80	48	
161	Albele	Assosa	Oda	Tuli	38	26	
162	Berhan Agricultural Development	Assosa	Oda	Belfudi	238	28	
163	Rodas	Assosa	Oda	Tuli	58	54	
164	SAPCO	Assosa	Oda	Dale	112	19	
165	River Side Agro-Industry	Assosa	Oda	Qito Shenshel	226	35.7	
166	Admo International	Assosa	Oda	Kanbodisho	466	30	
167	Ben Odor Agro Industry	Assosa	Menge	Fadenedu	989	136	
168	Oziak Oskodames	Assosa	Menge	Shagadema	484	229	
169	Kezin Trading	Assosa	Menge	Fadenedu	79	50	

S.No	Investor/Project name	Zone	Woreda	Kebele	Land Area in hectare	Land size developed so far in ha	Land transfer year
170	KDTM	Assosa	Menge	Fadenedu	60	26	
171	Hammer	Assosa	Menge	Fadenedu	18	18	
172	Ezana & Tsion	Assosa	Kurmuk	Akendiyo	609	163	
173	Balzaf Alcohol & Drinks Factory P. L. C	Assosa	Homosha	Tsore Al metema	1031	175.5	
174	Gesh Abo Integrated Farm	Assosa	Kamashi	Kobi Bedessa	170	50.4	
175	Zemen Aberho	Assosa	Sherkole	Abelentsa	217	60	
176	Tsegaye Tark	Assosa	Sherkole	Abelentsa	150	27.6	
177	Yard Agricultural Development	Assosa	Sherkole	Abelentsa	285	153.7	
178	Tenaw Alehegn	Assosa	Sherkole	Abelentsa	38	14	
179	Haji Yenus	Assosa	Sherkole	Abelentsa	358	18.2	
180	Habtamu Tadesse	Assosa	Sherkole	Abelentsa	262	43.8	
181	Seleki Agricultural Dev. & Trading Plc	Assosa	Sherkole	Abelentsa	458	128	
182	Adienb Agricultural Development	Assosa	Sherkole	Abelentsa	227	143	
183	Kelemu Gelaw	Assosa	Sherkole	Abelentsa	238	22.5	
184	Sapte Kokera	Kamashi	Yaso	Boji Tebela	211	193	
185	Chegesha	Kamashi	Yaso	Chegesha	423	404	
186	Boqa Integrated Agricultural Dev. Plc	Kamashi	Yaso	Mukereba	1038	522	
187	Cepa Agricultural Development	Kamashi	Yaso	Chegesha	498	447.6	
188	Burka Agricultural Development	Kamashi	Yaso	Logo Boqa	354	294	
189	Sapte	Kamashi	Yaso	Boji Tebela	298	151.8	
190	Kanan Land Agri. Dev. P. L. C	Kamashi	Yaso	Boji Tebela	331	252.9	
191	Tsega G/Hiwot	Kamashi	Yaso	Mukereba	466	311	
192	Boa Agricultural Development	Kamashi	Yaso	Hallo	203	23.4	
193	Bini-Berhan	Kamashi	Belogiga	Dedessa	900	421	
194	Gumbi Agricultural Development	Kamashi	Belogiga	Belogiganfo	378	378	
195	Soge Agricultural Development	Kamashi	Belogiga	Soge	1782	1120	
196	Biyu Agricultural Development	Kamashi	Belogiga	Shenkora	6749	1590	
197	Anger Bishandima	Kamashi	Belogiga	Soge	513	300	

S.No	Investor/Project name	Zone	Woreda	Kebele	Land Area in hectare	Land size developed so far in ha	Land transfer year
198	Anger Shenkora	Kamashi	Belogiga	Shenkora	458	180	
199	Aleli Agricultural Development	Kamashi	Belogiga	Shenkora	1075	671	
200	Belo Dedessa	Kamashi	Belogiga	Belo	461	325	
201	B-Nile Agricultural Development	Kamashi	Belogiga	Belo	1675	407	
202	Belo giganfof Agri. Dev.	Kamashi	Belogiga	Shenkora	976	400	
203	Adenew Teref	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	329	51	
204	Mohammed Nur	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	217	147	
205	Benguz Agricultural Development	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	442	105	
206	Tigistu Agricultural Development	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Tsotsora	300	63.6	
207	Eprem Agri. Dev. Enterprise	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Tsotsora	74	42	
208	Dr. Abdulkadir	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	169	155	
209	Alem Eshet Kidane	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	-	50	
210	Areaya Teshay	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	500	170	
211	Ethio-Agro Industry	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	1121	240	
212	Tulu Dekeno	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Tulu	112	25	
213	Shiferaw	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	1088	228	
214	Aberham Tesfaye	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	600	53	



S.No	Investor/Project name	Zone	Woreda	Kebele	Land Area in hectare	Land size developed so far in ha	Land transfer year
215	Worri Agricultural Development	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	648	70	
216	Yayinu	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	-	18.6	
217	Makuyab	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	255	138	
218	Tsegay	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	300	39	
219	Dabus Atimbaqo	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	1043	220	
220	Tibehag	Assosa	Mao-Komo	Yabeldiges	550	126	

Source: BoEPLAU 2012, Regional Investment Office, collated by the author.

## LDPI Working Paper Series

A convergence of factors has been driving a revaluation of land by powerful economic and political actors. This is occurring across the world, but especially in the global South. As a result, we see unfolding worldwide a dramatic rise in the extent of cross-border, transnational corporation-driven and, in some cases, foreign government-driven, large-scale land deals. The phrase 'global land grab' has become a catch-all phrase to describe this explosion of (trans)national commercial land transactions revolving around the production and sale of food and biofuels, conservation and mining activities.

The Land Deal Politics Initiative launched in 2010 as an 'engaged research' initiative, taking the side of the rural poor, but based on solid evidence and detailed, field-based research. The LDPI promotes in-depth and systematic enquiry to inform deeper, meaningful and productive debates about the global trends and local manifestations. The LDPI aims for a broad framework encompassing the political economy, political ecology and political sociology of land deals centred on food, biofuels, minerals and conservation. Working within the broad analytical lenses of these three fields, the LDPI uses as a general framework the four key questions in agrarian political economy: (i) who owns what? (ii) who does what? (iii) who gets what? and (iv) what do they do with the surplus wealth created? Two additional key questions highlight political dynamics between groups and social classes: 'what do they do to each other?', and 'how do changes in politics get shaped by dynamic ecologies, and vice versa?' The LDPI network explores a range of big picture questions through detailed in-depth case studies in several sites globally, focusing on the politics of land deals.

## Postponed Local Concerns?

### Implications of Land Acquisitions for Indigenous Local Communities in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State, Ethiopia.

Within Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, a substantial amount of land has been transferred to domestic and foreign investors by both regional and federal governments over the last few years. The land transfer process underway in the region based neither on the mapping of existing land uses nor on genuine participation of local communities and authorities has been resulting simultaneously not only in the dispossession and displacement of communities from their villages and cultivated lands, but also the destruction of the natural environment that sustained ecological services and local livelihoods. Particularly, Gumuz ethnic groups who depend on customary forms of land access and control as well as whose livelihoods based heavily on access to natural resources are being differentially affected. Despite the claims that the land investments bring social, economic, and environmental benefits to local communities, these anticipated benefits have hardly occurred so far and are unlikely to happen at least in the short run. What appears certain is that apparent threats have been posed to their economic, cultural, and ecological survival. The threats are resulting from the exercise of hegemonic power by federal and regional governments over the allocation of land in the interest of commercial investments at the expense of local land-based social relations and practices. Emphasizing the power relations between local communities, local, regional and federal governments (and investors), this study examines the contradictions of the land investment process and its impacts on local communities through a case study in three administrative districts in Benishangul-Gumuz region. The paper places particular concern on contests over land and authority and how this is played out in a federal context in which authority can be redefined over some key areas as observed in recent land deals.



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