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Title: Reframing the debate on how large-scale land acquisition (LaSLA) affects local livelihoods in Tanzania



The debate on large-scale land acquisition (LaSLA), popularly called “land grabbing” has become increasingly contentious in global development circles. LaSLA is the purchase or lease of large tracts of farmland by foreign investors in developing countries for food and biofuel production. On the one hand, LaSLA presents opportunities for countries to achieve development goals such as increasing GDP, creating employment, transferring technology, improving food security, modernizing agriculture, building infrastructure, integration to the global market, building human capital and developing rural communities. On the other hand, LaSLA can also threaten local well-being due to corruption, environmental degradation, conflict and violence, resource exploitation, and displacement of smallholders that often leads to loss of livelihoods and access to basic materials for a decent life. Despite multiple analyses on the opportunities and threats of LaSLA to the sustainable development of smallholders across Sub-Saharan Africa, there remains a great deal of uncertainty about the actual impacts of LaSLA on local livelihoods and living standards. Systematic and empirical evidence for either positive or negative effects is limited or lacking. Using the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, a pretest-posttest approach, and a quasi-experimental design (control and treatment groups) in household interviews supported with statistical analysis, this contribution presents the results of a comparative LaSLA case study on smallholder livelihoods conducted in Tanzania. Our research finds that under current governance regime and practices in Tanzania, the risks of LaSLA outweigh the expected benefits to the local population, yet there are potential positive outcomes if LaSLA is implemented correctly. Specifically, LaSLA deteriorates local peoples’ access to natural, physical, social, human, and financial capital and make them worse off. To ensure a more sustainable and equitable outcome, this study suggests that host governments should (1) scrutinize LaSLA deals and investors’ business models, (2) enforce LaSLA contracts, (3) conduct rigorous and a more comprehensive environmental and social impact assessment, and (4) mutually reinforce customary land rights, compensation policies, and the principle of free, prior, and informed consent. This study contributes to our understanding of the impacts and potential of LaSLA agriculture investments to ameliorate poverty and support the development of smallholders.