CHAPTER FIVE

FOREIGN LAND ACQUISITIONS IN MADAGASCAR:
COMPETING JURISDICTIONS OF ACCESS CLAIMS

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Abstract

The 1.3 million hectare agricultural project proposed by the South Korean company Daewoo Logistics in 2009 illustrates the paradoxical position of the Malagasy government on land management issues. At the time, the Ravalomanana government (2002-9, dissolved by the military and the current president, Rajoelina, in March 2009) was simultaneously encouraging foreign land investment and implementing land reform to secure local land rights. The public spotlight on the Daewoo project, a project which has since been abandoned, also drew attention to other types of land acquisition by foreigners, such as for forestry and mining. This chapter analyses the realities encountered in the local settings where local and international stakeholders vie for the same plots of land. Even though the new land laws offer legal protection of local rights, the interpretation and enforcement of these new laws do not guarantee the respect of existing land rights, whether secured or not by title deed or certificate. Contrary to the opposition voiced against Daewoo at the national level, local reactions have been somewhat muted, largely owing to the fact that local State representatives and village leaders are often, at least initially, interested in the economic opportunities promised as accompaniment to the international land projects. The authors also underline how local populations lack the necessary information to properly assess envisaged projects.
Introduction

During autumn 2008, a planned large-scale land acquisition in Madagascar attracted the attention of international media. The *Financial Times* revealed that a South Korean company, Daewoo Logistics, had undertaken negotiations with the Malagasy government to acquire 1,300,000 ha of arable land in four coastal regions (Blas 2008). Daewoo intended to produce 500,000 tons of palm oil in Eastern Madagascar and 4,000,000 tons of corn in the West, most of which was to be exported to the Korean market. It also planned to mobilise about 6 billion USD over 25 years to develop agricultural production and infrastructure (1,170 schools, 170 private hospitals, 250 markets, 120 churches, 60 power plants, 8 airports, 30 factories and silos, and 8 ports) and 70,000 jobs. This very large-scale project at first appeared as a powerful tool in the fight against poverty. However, its implementation required large tracts of arable land already subject to rights and in part cultivated.

In December 2008, a political crisis erupted in the capital of Madagascar. The opponents to Ravalomanana’s regime included the Daewoo project as symbolic of their plight, citing it as an example of how President Ravalomanana was stripping the country’s national resources. The revelation of another agribusiness project, involving 465,000 ha, led by the Indian company Varun International, reinforced the charge (Hervieu 2009). International NGOs were perceived as supporting the protests and played a role in mobilising Western public opinion. In Madagascar, this support fuelled national protests and contributed to the fall of the Ravalomanana government in March 2009. The current president, Rajoelina, was front and centre of opposition to these foreign projects. Eventually, the two agribusiness projects – Daewoo and Varun – were suspended and their main promoters left the country.

Rajoelina’s rhetoric relied heavily on the spectre of foreign investors like Daewoo and their attempts to destroy local land-based livelihoods by usurping ancestral lands. In Madagascar, land is a source of livelihood for approximately 80% of the population (MAEP 2005). In the vast majority of cases, cultivators hold no official title to the land they have been cultivating for generations. Land also anchors identity, as it is the portal to the ancestors, repository of culture and authentication of social status. Many Malagasy fear losing their lands more than anything else, as they commonly believe that land issues