This article provides an overview of the debate on foreign large-scale land acquisitions (FLA) and shows that there are urgent reasons to deepen and broaden the policy discussion. Whereas in the media and policy circles much attention is given mainly to improving land governance, with an emphasis on protecting local rights and stimulating responsible investments, I'll show that this will not be sufficient for turning the tide: current policies fight the symptoms while leaving the underlying causes unchanged; lessons from history are neglected; the speed and scale of the global land rush is highly underestimated; and sets of development-related policies are not consistent. While searching for ways for how to control large-scale land acquisitions, policies in the field of food security and climate change are generating claims for land, putting the land markets under pressure. In order to achieve equitable and sustainable development, policies need to be aligned.

Introduction

It is recently, since 2008/2009, that media reports were published on a rapidly appearing new phenomenon that developed in response to the food and climate/energy crisis: Capital rich countries with arable land scarcity such as Qatar, and other Gulf States, Saudi-Arabia, South Korea, Japan and China, searched for large areas of fertile land in Africa for the cultivation of food and/or biofuels. Following the food crisis in 2007 and 2008, and stimulated by the growing demand for bio-energy, these countries, but also investors from the EU and the US (as well as from South Africa, India and Brazil etc.), started to buy or lease millions of hectares of fertile land, in Madagascar, Ethiopia, Mozambique; but also Senegal, Tanzania, Zambia, Ghana; and a number of post-conflict countries such as Liberia, Sudan, DRC etc. Whereas most attention was given to Africa, land investments were also made in large parts of Asia and Latin America.
Based on this ‘global land grab’ (also called ‘the global scramble for farm land; or more neutrally ‘the global land rush’ or ‘large-scale land deals’), a discussion started about whether or not these (new) investments in land could become a positive force of development, and two opposite positions appeared (Cotula et al. 2009; Zoomers 2010; Borras and Franco 2010). On the one hand, the World Bank and other actors stressed the positive aspects, acknowledging that it was good that there was finally attention for the agricultural sector (also illustrated by the publication in 2008 of the World Development Report ‘Agriculture for development’) which had been neglected for almost two decades. Land was assumed to be unproductive and not used anyway (Cotula and Vermeulen 2009). Large-scale investments (and the use of ‘empty’ land) were expected to stimulate agricultural development—help improving food security and solving the climate crisis (through the establishment of climate sound agriculture); contribute to employment generation, bring in new technology, while offering new sources of tax income (Deininger and Dyerlee 2011).

On the other hand, also in response to the negative outcomes, organizations such as Via Campesina, but also the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food (Olivier de Schutter), stressed the negative side (mostly from the human rights perspective), indicating that these investments were threatening local groups, who often did not have secure land titles and could hardly defend themselves. Processes of ‘land grabbing’ would almost inevitably lead to exclusion, fragmentation, displacement and enclosure (De Schutter 2009; also FIAN 2010). According to reports published by the Oakland Institute (2011) ‘these largely unregulated land purchases are resulting in virtually none of the promised benefits for native populations, but instead are forcing millions of small farmers off ancestral lands and small, local food farms in order to make room for export commodities, including biofuels and cut flowers’ (http://www.oaklandinstitute.org). They—and others—also warn Africa of “new colonialism” from foreign investors (including hedge funds) and governments interested only in extracting the continent’s natural resources to enrich themselves and not the African people. According to Cotula et al. (2009: 68) ‘Land issues are emotive: large-scale transfers to foreign interests raise the spectre of the “bad old days” of colonialism and exploitative plantations’ (…). International land deals may be perceived as bringing back the “bad old days” of colonialism, particularly in Africa. This is particularly so when rental fees are zero or close to zero (Cotula et al. 2009: 104).

Since the start of this debate, much discussion has taken place about the consequences. Organizations such as GRAIN (http://www.grain.org) and the International Land Coalition (http://www.landcoalition.org) are