This research was carried out for Senter for Interkulturell Kommunikasjon (Norway) in the framework of partnership with the University of Toliara (Madagascar). My collaboration had a length of sixteen months, fourteen of which were spent in Madagascar (October 2008-December 2009).

There are various ways to define this phenomenon. Academics prefer terms as “commercial pressure on land”, “investment deals” or “large-scale land acquisitions”; while media and NGO’s use less prudent terms like ‘land grab” or “land rush”. However, despite the feeling of “appropriation” that some of these deals recall, as pointed out by Etienne Leroy (Journée foncier 3.10.2009), these deals follow a legal path. Therefore, I will use ‘large-scale land acquisition’, as it better reflects the case analysed.

Developing countries have a pressing need for investments; they need economic growth and foreign trade. Consequently foreign companies have a strong bargaining position while farmers, peasants and smallholders have little leverage (Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009: 2). In addition, in many places locals tend to access land under customary arrangements and the lack of formal land titles worsens their bargaining position. As pointed out by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), “land leases are often justified on the basis that the land being acquired by

The acquisition or leasing of extended areas of land in developing countries by private firms is a growing phenomenon (Cotula et al. 2009: 4–5; Shepard and Anuradha 2009). Some trigger factors for this are: food security issues tied to food prices, energy crops to respond to the growing demand for agrofuel, financial benefits, carbon markets and search for water (Grain 2009; Smaller and Mann 2009: 4–6). Countries with limited access to land and water constraints need to find alternatives to ensure food security for the domestic market. Moreover, one of the consequences of the rise in food prices is the increased value of arable land, making investments in the sector lucrative.

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the foreign investor is ‘unproductive’ or ‘underutilized’ (Ibid.). However, land is often used for some activity, such as hunting, transhumant grazing, or wood collecting. Nevertheless, “these uses tend to be undervalued in official assessments because they are not marketable, but they can provide valuable livelihood sources to the poor” (Ibid.). IFPRI also highlights that further studies are needed to shed light on land deals. Documented information is scarce, resulting in a lack of transparency that limits the possibilities of the various local stakeholders.

A Political Crisis

In January 2009, a political crisis erupted in Madagascar. In the capital Antananarivo, groups of town dwellers, led by the young former mayor Andry Rajoelina, gathered to protest against Marc Ravalomanana’s government. There were three main causes for the demonstrations: (i) the purchase of a new presidential jet; (ii) the closure of Viva TV and radio broadcasting, owned by Rajoelina;4 (iii) and South Korean Daewoo’s plan to lease a large portion of land in the country (Pellerin 2009; Teyssier, Ramarojohn and Ratsialonana 2010: 5; Randrianja 2012: 15).

The ‘Daewoo case’ is the focus of this chapter. Given the importance of transparency in land deals, and the general lack of analysis of this type of transactions, the aim here is to outline the proposed Daewoo project in Madagascar; how the Malagasy government handled it; and in particular, how it is generally acknowledged as one of the causes of a coup d’état (Ploch 2009: 4; Randrianja 2012: 15).5

The academic literature on large-scale land acquisition is limited, while there is a considerable amount of information from the media. This chapter is based mostly on media sources, publically available documents and studies and information from key informants in Madagascar. The analysis was conducted at the same time of the events, thus semi-structured interviews were used to support and comprehend the dynamics reported by the media. Discourses, defined by Jorgensen & Phillips (2002: 1) as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of

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5 Most of the international community defined the power shift as coup d’état, however in Madagascar itself people still fiercely debate whether the change of government was in fact a coup d’état.