



## Land Rush: An interdisciplinary action-research project on natural resource grabbing in the Great Lakes Region of Africa

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### 1. Overarching research project: Land Rush in the Great Lakes



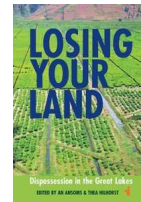
Our project studies the role of rural transformations and the scramble for land in the Great Lakes Region's development process. **Global drivers of change** - the neoliberalization of agriculture, land grabbing and climate change - have shaped and continue to shape agrarian transformations that currently take place. These global drivers interact with **local drivers of change** specific to the Great Lakes Region, more specifically: the extreme demographic pressure in a context where ethnic, economic and political cleavages have been anchored in the social tissue through multiple conflicts and severe forms of violence. We aim not only at describing the relations between global and local drivers of change, but also the way in which they interconnect with **development policies** (agrarian and land policies specifically) in Rwanda, Burundi and eastern DRC. Furthermore, we study how these policies and drivers of change interact with **peasants' livelihood strategies** in the context of increasing social differentiation in the rural milieu. We analyse smallholders' bargaining positions in the land arena, and focus in particular upon the **resistances strategies** they develop (potentially in interaction with the civil society) in reaction to the development policies.



### 2. Research outcomes

The various outcomes of our research project are grouped and rendered publicly accessible on [www.land-rush.org](http://www.land-rush.org). A couple of important realisations are:

The publication of the **book** *Losing your land: dispossession on the Great Lakes Region* (An Ansoms and Thea Hilhords eds., 2014, James Currey). This book "demonstrates how land grabbing affects smallholder farmers, creating conditions conducive to violence. Addressing issues often invisible to outside observers but crucial to local wellbeing, this book is essential reading for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners concerned with development and peacebuilding in Africa" (Catherine Newbury).



The development of a **simulation game** – Land Rush. Land Rush is a game that simulates the complex reality of access to, and management of, natural resources in developing countries. Land Rush plunges the gamer in a simulation of a rush for land and natural resources. Players take up the role of poor, middle-class or rich farmers. They compete for scarce natural resources. They make choices about crop and production techniques. And they face unforeseeable events with a positive or negative impact upon their livelihoods.

Doing research on competition for natural resource and agrarian change is complex. Land conflicts may be sensitive topics to discuss at the level of local communities. We have developed and tested this innovative methodology for action-research in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. In collaboration with local civil society partners, we have transformed the Land Rush game into **participative community theatre**. The sketches are locally specific and relate to local-level struggles. By placing the controversy out of the real context into a fictional one, participants are able to discuss real-life conflict in more subtle ways. This helps frank discussion and problem-solving.



3. **Some key research findings** - Partly based upon introduction of *Losing your land* – Research realised by An Ansoms, Aymar Bisoka Nyenyezi, Klara Claessens, Giuseppe Cioffo, Emery Mushagalusa Mudinga

**Land** has, over the past decade, become increasingly commodified and the **source of fierce competition** between and among both internal and external forces. Contests over land in Africa's Great Lakes region are often embedded in long-term historical trajectories; they are connected with local strife and violence, and subject to power dynamics of local elites. Our research concentrates on three settings in the Great Lakes Region: South Kivu (DRC), Burundi and Rwanda. The three countries share the challenge of the extreme demographic pressure in a context where ethnic, economic and political cleavages have been anchored in the social tissue through multiple conflicts and severe forms of violence. However, their political context is very different.

Our **DRC** research analyses how negotiations over access to and control over land are shaped by historical evolutions and broader societal events at the local, regional and national levels.



Competition over land occurs between and within different ethnic groups, and is rooted in a history of violence, cross-border migration, and regional instability. Moreover, contemporary land conflicts can work as a catalyst for the (re)formation of armed groups and for renewed local violence that has the potential to spill over. Successful control over land rights depends upon actors' capacity to mobilize support, requiring an ability to efficiently instrumentalize the legitimacy of a variety of institutions, ranging from the Congolese army to

state officials at various administrative levels, a variety of customary authorities and other armed fractions. Such institutional confusion creates opportunities for the less powerful actors and groups to contest the authorities and the roles of local elites. But the latter often find themselves in a 'stronger' position, not only in terms of financial capacity but also, and even more importantly, in terms of formal and informal institutional connectedness. This dimension of political economy needs to be addressed when working towards a more equal playing field.

In **Burundi**, our research again illustrates how history shapes contemporary land conflicts. Patronage networks, clientelism and nepotism continue to play a central role in land issues, regardless of which elite group holds power. The actors involved call upon a broad range of existing normative frameworks: legal provisions, arrangements arising from mediation, provisions from the Arusha Peace Agreement, and customary norms. But the 'norms' that ultimately prevail in land conflicts result from the power play amongst the elites. Competing power holders may back up a weaker group in a land conflict to support their own electorate or to undermine political adversaries. When the national-level power constellation changes, the odds in micro-level land conflicts may turn overnight and seemingly settled disputes may be reignited. Competition between different ethnic groups is an important factor, but so too are rivalries between political parties. However, people do tend to act when faced with the risk of losing their land. Power relations may be modified in response to the contestation strategies developed by subordinate actors at the micro level, in their attempts to turn the odds in the land conflict into their favour.



In **Rwanda**, finally, our research has focused upon the influence of agrarian modernisation and land-use regulation policies on land rights and livelihoods of smallholder farmers. It is the Rwandan government's intention to promote a professional, market-driven and efficient agricultural sector, which implies a reorganization of human habitat, land tenure, and cultivation systems. Through a strong top-down organised administrative structure, the state is implementing a nation-wide reengineering of the rural countryside. However, these ambitions contrast with current Rwandan habitat patterns of scattered homesteads across the country's

hillside, as well as with most smallholders' risk reduction strategies, such as the cultivation of multiple crops and the exploitation of multiple plots. The government's policy suits a small group



of larger, wealthier farmers who often belong to the local elite. However, for most smallholders, opportunities are shrinking as the space of 'modernity' expands. Consequently, the outcome of land-use regulation policies is similar to more straightforward cases of involuntary land transfers: smallholders losing access to land, while the group of unskilled labourers is growing in a context of limited rural and urban employment opportunities. At the same time, farmers and civil society actors develop hidden resistance strategies that are played out very subtly in the public forum.

When taking a comparative perspective, several **common themes** emerge.

- **History** - After the region has for decades been torn apart by local and regional conflicts, war and instability, new opportunities and ways to realise underexploited sources of revenue arise. At the same time, these new opportunities intensify competition over available natural resources, including over land. However, contested land right transfers and outright land grabbing are by no means new phenomena in the Great Lakes Region. Awareness of the historical dimension of power struggles, contest and conflict is extremely important given the **close interconnection between frequent changes in power constellations on the one hand, and struggles in the land arena on the other.**
- **Politics** - Shifts in power constellations have affected and continue to affect struggles in the land arena. Contested land transfers occur at all levels – within families, between neighbours and in communities – and may involve official and customary authorities, armed groups, and outside actors. More specifically, land concentration in the hands of local elites and land acquisitions by external actors can have an immense impact on local living conditions, and may feed local-level frustration. A profound understanding of the **role of land in the configuration of power and public authority** is thus crucial.
- **Economy** - In a context of globalization and liberalization, the entire African continent is experiencing a 'rush' to commercialize its natural resources. International and national investors show a renewed interest in land as an investment opportunity since the economic and food crisis of 2008. This concurs with a broader international agenda to intensify the role of agriculture in African development through Green Revolution policies. The **neoliberal-inspired discourse of 'modernised agriculture' as an opportunity for development is instrumentalised** by international and national investors to legitimise their claims on land.
- **Geopolitics** - All previous dimensions together – (1) the historical foundations of land conflicts, (2) the role of land in the configuration of power, (3) and the commercialisation of land in a context of globalisation and liberalisation – add up to a complex geopolitical puzzle of a **peasantry under stress in a region under stress.** Increased competition over land contributes to already existing tensions; and recurrent conflicts over land may hinder a return to local-level peace and stability, while feeding animosities between competing groups. Resistance strategies are omni-present; whether in the open public sphere – potentially taking violent forms – or in the hidden sphere through inventive sabotage or circumvention. Such resistance strategies should be considered in a long-term perspective: actors who at some point lost land rights do not necessarily seek immediate confrontation, but wait for the 'coins of power to turn'. Consequently, seemingly definitive resolutions of land contestations are never definitive in the heads of those who feel disadvantaged by the outcome.

