Pubblicazione quadrimestrale
numero 3/2015

afriche e orienti

www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/africheorienti

rivista di studi ai confini tra africa mediterraneo e medio oriente

anno XVII numero 3/2015

The New Harvest.
Agrarian Policies and Rural Transformation in Southern Africa

edited by
Davide Chinigò

AIEP EDITORE

African Peasantry, Rural Transformations and Land Grabbing in Contemporary (Southern) Africa

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"At the centre of the politics is the rising demand for arable land. Kuwonu of WILDAf declared: 'The issue of land in Africa is at the heart of our concerns... Land is coveted by all, including farmers and fishers, but it is also subject to new demand from outsiders'".[1]

Introduction

In the last decades, new trajectories of agrarian transformation of the rural contexts, and the emergence of new actors and social forces have favoured renewed debates about both agrarian question and agrarian transition in Africa (see i.e. Akram-Lodhi, Kay 2010a, 2010b). Indeed, there is a discussion about the role of the African peasantry in contemporary global economy (Van der Ploeg 2010). Meanwhile, we have witnessed a new wave of economic interest towards African agriculture, mostly associated with widely reported phenomena of land grabbing (see *infra*), while new programmes of land tenure reform aiming at redefining customary land systems have developed (see Kaarhus, Dondeyne 2015, also for useful references). Transformations concerning agriculture in developing countries have favoured a meaningful debate on rural development, in order

to define new political agendas of both international organizations and governments. Currently, in the search for new ideas and strategies, at international level there is a wide discussion on how to strengthen and improve the governance of the land and how to encourage responsible investments, in an attempt to control the possible negative consequences of large-scale land acquisitions and the impact they can have on rural population (Zoomers 2013).

Thus, drawing from a reflection on the latest debates about rural development in developing countries - and in Africa more specifically - this article intends to present the main characteristics of the current processes of transformation and change in the rural areas, by considering peasantries' role in an increasingly internationalized context, and by discussing their role both in relation to rural development policies and to the main effects of the processes of land grabbing. It is a very helpful way to analyse agrarian transformations, having in mind that the recent trajectories of the rural world in Africa are shaped by global economic trends defining different and contradictory results which would require further investigation.

Indeed, many critical analyses of the processes of agrarian change emphasize peasants' role in relation to dispossession, oppression and processes of social differentiation. Recent research indicates that these processes are varied and complex (for the discussion see among others: White *et al.* 2012; Wolford *et al.* 2013; Edelman, Oya, Borras 2013; Hall *et al.* 2015).

Processes of land and resource dispossession, as well as their political drivers and consequences, have long been objects of research on agrarian change. Diverse and recent forms of land dispossession - the so-called land grabbing - have refocused scholarly research, debate and analysis (Fairbairn *et al.* 2014). This notwithstanding, as mentioned by Borras (2009: 10): "'Everyday peasant politics' is the type of politics that remains almost invisible to researchers, policymakers, and agrarian movement activists, but can be very powerful in transforming national policies".

In order to offer a schematic guideline to current debates, we can affirm that research about land and resource control and dispossession are based on at least two previous waves of academic interests. The first is the wide debate about the meaning of European enclosures for capitalist development: dispossession and expropriation were largely seen as an historical stage in the development of capitalism, that is the so-called primitive accumulation (Fairbairn *et al.* 2014). Indeed, the classical agrarian question, that is the evolution from the feudal to the industrial capitalist model, has not been completed in many developing regions, as happened in Europe. In order to describe agrarian transition, Bernstein (2003) suggests that we have to take into consideration: the role of agrarian classes, the transformation of the social relations of production in the transition to capitalism, and how such transformations may contribute to the accumulation process. He also suggests that processes of transformation include: intensified exploitation of land incorporated within colonial rule, and commoditization

of peasant agriculture, mostly linked to export-oriented forms of agriculture. This is certainly the case of Southern Africa where the role of settler agriculture transformed the rural landscape. In addition: "what is specific about the forms of domination in Southern Africa is not just the importance of its legacies of settler colonialism, but also the enduring legacy of politically organized regional systems of migrant labour" (O'Laughlin *et al.* 2013: 3).

The second is the debate on displacement and on the politics of resource access and control, also linked to land grabbing and any other forms of agricultural land expropriation. The emergence of political movements together with both scholarly and activist documentations of 'development-induced displacement', has brought to new critical reflections on the contemporary and historical capitalist expropriations, and new forms of analysis shifting from "conflict in the factory and the field" to "conflict around forests and rivers" (Fairbairn *et al.* 2014: 654).

Moreover, the ongoing researches and debate about land and rural development highlight that the contemporary context of neo-liberal globalization and land deals in Africa is defining an emerging vision of the world as a globally organized 'free trade' economy based on global market priorities and managed by a largely unaccountable political and economic elite (which include local government and local rent-seeking groups), thus strengthening the issue of access to the land and of the economic role of the peasantry (White *et al.* 2012). Thus, as Cotula (2012: 671) suggests: "the global land rush reflects profound economic and social transformations in agriculture. The projected mismatch between global demand and supply in agricultural commodities has created expectations of growing commercial returns from agriculture. The global restructuring of the food industry has created incentives towards greater vertical integration in agriculture, while economic considerations have increased the attractiveness of land as an asset class for financial players".

As mentioned by an editorial published in the journal *Agrarian South* (2013: 242): "At the turn of the twenty-first century, the logic of capitalism, in its monopoly-finance form, continues to clear out the countryside and destroy ecosystems. This remains the *main tendency* on a global scale, fuelling incessant migration, land grabs, resource conflicts and geopolitical power plays" The editorial continues: "This is the challenge posed by 're-peasantization' (...). Re-peasantization should be understood as a properly modern phenomenon, not a throw-back to an idyllic past, much less to a new system of patriarchy" (italics in original).

Thus, as Van der Ploeg (2007) suggests, re-peasantization is not only an important analytical category that enables us to understand the differentiated impact of the current global economic processes. It also can be used to study significant local experiences, such as, for example, the Movimento dos Sem Terra in Brazil, and other struggles. In this regard, Zimbabwe is a very interesting case in Southern Africa for discussion: it offers some important insights for the wider international debate about the future of the

rural world, and the potential for state-led redistributive land reform based (largely) on a smallholder model (Scoones et al. 2010). Indeed: "Re-peasantization is, above all, the process of establishing a new and sustainable equilibrium between town and country, based on new social relations of production, use of natural resources, and systems of distribution and consumption. It is a process fully consonant with technological innovation and industrial development, and a prerequisite to the resolution of the national question in the peripheries of the system" (Agrarian South 2013: 242).

Rural world, peasants and rural transformation in Africa

Nowadays African agriculture lives a very difficult situation. While the future of so-called smallholders farmers is highly debatable, there is substantial evidence that the contribution of agriculture to growth and poverty reduction will continue to depend on the broad participation of smallholder farmers to production. As mentioned by Holmén (2015), the issue of food security in sub-Saharan Africa is a matter of major concern. More specifically, Africa is very poor and about 70% of the labour force is still engaged in agriculture activities, mostly based on small-scale farming using simple technology and very few external inputs, with low levels of productivity. Thus, sub-Saharan Africa needs investments in agriculture, especially for food production.

Indeed, in Africa the agrarian question and rural transformation are related to many other issues such as food insecurity, agricultural labour exploitation, and unequal terms of international trade. According to Moyo (2008), the processes of concentration and inequality, as well as the role of rural movements, are not always taken into sufficient consideration - and in the Southern Africa region in particular. Some authors have tried to better understand the complexity of the agrarian question in Africa by examining issues such as: insecurity of tenure, the role of market in agricultural transformation, patterns of land alienation and concentration, undemocratic structures of local government, the construction of customary tenure, and conflicts and competition on the land (see among others: Toulmin, Quan 2000; Wily 2011; Lund, Boone 2013; Peters 2013a, 2013b).

The creation of new emergent capitalist classes, that is those who are able to accumulate capital and productive assets on a larger scale, the transformation of property rights, and patterns of primitive accumulation are in progress in the global economy. These processes are not coherent because there is a constant and continuous overlapping between communal and private property of the land. In many cases, elites in power use so-called traditional and communal means of production in order to produce commodities and, above all, in order to avoid the costs of reproduction of labour. This is certainly the case of most of rural Africa (see i.e.: Peters 2004; Chimhowu, Woodhouse 2006; Cotula 2007). Indeed, as mentioned by Lund and Boone (2013: 1): "land issues are often not about land only. Rather, they invoke issues of property more broadly, implicating social and political relationships in the widest sense".

Privatization and commoditization of the land may result in turning subsistence

producers into proletarians and petty commodity producers as well as creating new groups of capitalist producers[2] from village leaders, traditional chiefs, local elites and government officials. This may mean that rural social formations may become a sort of small comprador enclaves, while the workers remain in an intermediate semi-proletarian condition (Moore 2004).

The contemporary development discourse is concentrated on the possible profitable relationship between rural development policies, redistributive marked-led land reform, and support to small-scale producers. Redistributive land reforms, and what Borras and Franco (2012b) call 'land sovereignty', are seen by many analysts as the bases for a just world food system. However, beside the rhetoric of market-led land reforms and the support to small-scale commodity producers, the marginalisation of the smallest and poorest producers in developing countries - and in Africa more specifically - is currently growing (Bernstein 2010: 82 ff.), with an increase in claims for the right to food and to food sovereignty (Desmarais 2007; McMichael 2012, 2015); sovereignty is about securing peasant's mode of farming, that is what Wittman (2009) has called "agrarian citizenship".

The twentieth century has generated a rich and diverse experience regarding the role of small farmers in poverty reduction strategies and economic development (Birner, Resnik 2010). For many analysts, smallholder development is one of the main ways to reduce poverty in low-income countries. The main sponsors of this approach have been international institutions such as the World Bank (WB), and bilateral donors as well. The FAO's Committee on World Food Security affirms: "smallholder agriculture is the foundation of food security in many countries and an important part of the social/economic/ecological landscape in all countries" (CFS 2013: 11), and continue by saying that: "the potential efficiency of smallholder farming relative to larger farms has been widely documented, focusing on the capacity of smallholders to achieve high production levels per unit of land through the use of family labor in diversified production systems" (CFS 2013: 12). The WB insists on the central role of agriculture for development, particularly in order to alleviate poverty (World Bank 2003, 2008). Indeed a recent WB's document (2013: xvi) affirms that: "The dominant focus of support is on smallholder agriculture".

Thus, land titling has emerged as a key mechanism to address community and individual vulnerabilities (Peters 2013b). Land grabbing has reinforced the assumption that secure land titles are necessary to ensure protection of the poor, progressive distribution of land, and access to resources by rural communities, while corporations are expected to make consultations with local communities in order to get land concessions (Edelman *et al.* 2014).[3] More specifically: "in the discussion of (and practice around) property and secure access to land, there is of course the danger of assuming that (1) titles are the best means of securing access and (2) such access will necessarily provide the stability that will generate entrepreneurial or productive behaviour on the land in ways that

align with the goals of either neoliberal rationality or food sovereignty" (Edelman *et al.* 2014: 923).

Today, despite large-scale commoditization of the land, we find an anomalous situation in which land tenure systems are still based on customary rules (Chimhowu, Woodhouse 2006). In this framework a sort of partial primitive accumulation occurs. Lund and Boone (2013: 10) describe how: "The fusion of customary, state-leveraging, and market strategies of land access promote accumulation on the part of well-positioned actors, but appear to reproduce fluidity in the norms and terms of land access, rather than institutional closure". We must take into consideration that customary land tenure systems are characterized by individual control rather than communal one. Indeed, we can agree with Ribot and Peluso (2003: 158) when they affirm that access to the land is a complicated, contradictory and overlapping "bundle of powers" rooted in various forms of local and traditional authority, which may enable actors to gain access to resources for themselves or to mediate and even control the access of others. Many evidences from the most recent wave of large-scale land acquisitions suggest that customary authorities often play a decisive role in the approval of land concessions. On this, as an example, Fairbairn (2013: 344) reports the significant role played by traditional authorities in defining the concession for a large forestry project (Chikweti Forests of Niassa) in Mozambique.

As mentioned by Ruth Hall, further testing through new research is needed, bearing in mind that: pre-existing customary institutions could mean that tenure insecurity may not be the primary productivity constraint in Africa; African farmers are less able to transform investment into production due to constraints in access to inputs; and there is a lack of public investments in infrastructure and services.[4]

Meanwhile we have to consider that during the last thirty years, the emphasis on the promotion of an agricultural export-led strategy as the principal means of enhancing rural accumulation, in many African countries has favoured a renewed interest by both state and investors towards a stronger agricultural integration into global economy and agro-food commodity chains. More specifically, Moyo (2012) explains the 'failed agrarian transition' in the light of colonial and neoliberal accumulation by dispossession and exploitation of labour. He argues that neoliberal policies accelerated the process of undermining and dispossessing small peasants and encouraging large-scale investments. Moreover, reforming land tenure tends to create the bases for contemporary land grab, that is a sort of "new scramble over African lands" which express "the escalation of capital's speculative tendency to accumulate by dispossession (...)" (Moyo 2011: 73 and 78).

Broadly speaking, during the twentieth century a capitalist system which subordinated African agriculture developed, though without implementing sustainable industrial processes. Meanwhile, the traditional pre-capitalist agrarian systems, characterized by a close social relationship between agrarian property owners and labour, have not

been completely replaced by a transition to capitalism via primitive accumulation (Bernstein 2004; Moyo 2012; Oya 2013a). Through the commoditization of the land, the so-called vernacular land markets are increasing, whereby the procedures for promoting economic development in rural areas are defined by an informal rule system. Undoubtedly, the peripheral processes of primitive accumulation which are favouring capitalist development can coexist with other modes of production (Harrison 2001). Old modes of production seems to be functional to contemporary capitalism. Many African countries still reflect diverse forms of ongoing primitive accumulation: the incumbent classes are becoming more and more capitalist, property relations more and more privatized, while the subordinate classes are losing the chance to get adequate livelihoods through access to the land, thus becoming poorer and more marginalized. However, they do not always become fully proletarians; rather they are inserted in a complex process of agrarian transformation.

Debating and reflecting on the agrarian question in Africa - and in Southern Africa more specifically[5] - is significant because the agrarian transformation is strictly intertwined with anti-colonial struggle, and the 'unsolved national question' (Moyo, Yeros 2005). In the former settler colonies of Southern Africa the process of concentration of the land in the white minorities, inequality, and the role of the regional labour systems are particularly relevant, thus emphasizing the issue of land redistribution. In Southern Africa the land question and agrarian transformation are closely related to state-building and citizenship, as a key factor in the formation of political consensus, in defining citizenship rights, and in the implementation of development policies - including the management of natural resources through legitimate systems of land access. Thus, independent states have sought to set up institutions of land governance designed to control, discipline and deliver development to the people (Alexander 2006). Therefore, the contemporary agrarian question and the role of the peasantry in Southern Africa is still deeply marked by its distinctive history of colonial conquest, alienation and dispossession, and its uneven trajectories of capitalist accumulation and development, including high level of land concentration (particularly in former settler economies) (O'Laughlin *et al.* 2013; Helliker, Murisa 2011; Kleinbooi 2010). Indeed, colonial systems were based on the expropriation of the land, spatial segregation of indigenous peoples in native reserves, the systematic regulation of migrant labour, the taxation of peasants, and massive state support for the development of a white settler farming class (Cousins, Scoones 2010; Moyo 2012). Thus, a highly dualistic and racially divided agrarian structure emerged. The system was composed by a large-scale (white) capitalist farming sector, which dominated production for both the domestic and international markets, on the one hand, and a struggling peasant sector, on the other hand. O'Laughlin (2008: 199) argues that: "Southern Africa's agrarian crisis is rooted not in what it does not have - liberal economic and political institutions - but in

what it does have: a history of integration into global markets and the class relations of capitalism through violence and colonial domination".

The former settler colonies in the region inherited racially skewed patterns of land distribution, and each country had to cope with its own history of dispossession and undermining of peasant production (Bernstein 2003). Moreover, we can affirm that the specific history of the region has impacted on the current national policies of the states of the region: "when we think about land issues, what is immediately apparent is how overwhelmingly important is *the national level*. Debates over land law and policy and realities on the ground are hugely influenced by the national political landscape" (Palmer 2008: 6, italics in original). Therefore, current process of transformation in Southern Africa have been influenced by history, even if with different trajectories (Zamponi 2015).

In Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa a key issue for the governments was whether or not to fundamentally alter the agrarian structure through a large-scale and rapid redistribution of productive land. For many reasons, including doubts as to the productive capacity of small-scale producers, the idea of promoting an economically viable agriculture through removing barriers to racial ownership of commercial agriculture through market-based land reforms, as well as by preserving the productive role of commercial agriculture, is still a central feature of rural policies (Cousins, Scoones 2010) (with the partial exception of Zimbabwe since 2000).

The case of Zimbabwe certainly epitomize these trends (see: Scoones 2015; Gaidzanwa 2015). In particular, the radical land reform programme launched since 2000 express today's tensions concerning land, agrarian transformation and rural development in the region The research carried out by Scoones et al. (2010: 236-40) critically reviews the characteristics of the land reform programme in the country, highlighting the complexity and variety of the phenomena, and the role of small farming and peasants. These processes are linked to the long debate about the role of the peasantry. In particular, Bryceson (1999: 185) highlighted: "the fundamental problem of African peasant agriculture's inability to compete in today's global market", as a component of her broader thesis of "de-agrarianisation" or "de-peasantisation". Historically rural dwellers in Africa whose reproduction is secured by a combination of farming and off-farm activities - including the many whose off-farm income has been crucial for their own survival - have struggled to meet the reproduction costs of their farming activity. In many cases, the crisis of the peasant sector occurs because of the collapse of real wages, and employment opportunities in the formal sector, intensifying the search for means of livelihood both on and off the land (Bernstein 2006).

However, the survival and persistence of peasantries in a globalizing and ever more commodified world is still a matter of debate, particularly meaningful in sub-Saharan Africa. The demise of the peasant was announced by capitalists, by intellectuals, by

national and development planners, "indeed, by virtually everyone but the peasants themselves" (Desmarais 2007: 195).

Agrarian transformation and land grabbing

In the recent years, there has been a growing interest in economic investment in farmland - often defined as land grabbing - through large-scale acquisitions of land in Africa, Asia and Latin America. These acquisitions involve land purchases or long-term leases for a certain period of time (usually 30-99 years), by corporate (business, non-profit or public) entities or governments in a third country for the production of agricultural export crops. Usually foreigners can lease, but not own, land that is registered as state land. Many drivers seem to influence the demand for land for other purposes in addition to that of food production (Baglioni, Gibbon 2013). Among them: biofuels, timber, export commodities, tourism, speculation. The phenomenon was "ignited by the 2007-08 global food, fuel and financial crises, international investors are now seeking other outlets for 'excess' capital when conventional markets seem bleak" (Holmén 2015: 458). Indeed, expectations of the private sector on the growth of prices of agricultural commodities, and the concerns of many governments in achieving food and energy security are considered to be behind most of large-scale land acquisitions.
Borras and Franco (2012a: 34) remind that: "Global land grab has emerged as a catch-all phrase to refer to the explosion of (trans)national commercial land transactions and land speculation in recent years mainly, but not solely, around the large-scale production and export of food and biofuels (...) It rightly calls attention to the actual and potential role of current land deals in pushing a new cycle of enclosures and dispossession, and therefore the urgent need to resist them. But like all 'catch-all' phrases intended to frame and motivate political action, this one too suffers from limits and weaknesses that partly make it vulnerable to capture by undemocratic elite and corporate agendas."
More specifically Holmén (2015: 458) affirms that: "Despite much contemporary attention, what this land rush means and what its implications may be in the short and long run remain unclear" and Cotula et al. (2014: 2) point out that: "Since media reports about 'land grabbing' began flowing in the late 2000s, much research has emerged that aims to shed light on the scale, geography, drivers, features and early outcomes of large land deals. But reliable data remain elusive, partly because of limited access to information and practical and methodological challenges. International debates are still shaped by misperceptions about how much land is being acquired, where, by whom, how and with what consequences".
As mentioned by Hall (2011: 193): "while effective as activist terminology land grabbing obscures differences in terms of legality, structure and effects of land deals and sometimes deflects attention from the roles of domestic elites and governments". For some analysts land grabbing would represent a new form of enclosure of commons

(White *et al.* 2012). More specifically: "implicit in much writing about land grabbing is that is illegal. Generally, this is a misunderstanding. Contemporary land acquisitions in Africa are in the form of lease contracts, generally between the leaser and the state. Hence, they are legal. Whether enclosure of the commons also is legitimate is, however, debatable" (Holmén 2013: 577), given that usually in Africa small poor peasants suffer because of the negative impacts of land deals.

The polarisation in debates about land grabbing is also fuelled by competing evidence and figures on the scale of the deals, coming from different institutions, researchers, governments and investors themselves. Figures about the phenomenon are very different and not always reliable and verified (Cotula, 2012, 2013; Oya 2013a, 2013b; Holmén 2015). Cotula (2012) in particular highlights problems and differences about figures, Scoones et al. (2013: 469) signal that there is a "profound uncertainty about what it is that is being counted", and Anseeuw *et al.* (2012: 4) affirm that Africa is "the prime target of the land rush". However they mention that of 134 million hectares of reported deals in Africa, only 34 million has been cross-referenced.

Both media and development scholars have drawn attention to foreign interests in achieving land rights. This phenomenon has favoured a wide international debate on its impact on relevant issues such as environment, human rights, national sovereignty, livelihoods, food security, development policies and possible local conflicts over control of the land (Cotula *et al.* 2009; Cotula 2012; Borras, Franco 2010a, 2012a, 2012b; Deininger *et al.* 2011; De Schutter 2011; Anseeuw *et al.* 2012; McMichael 2012; Edelman *et al.* 2014; Van der Ploeg 2014).

Recently, Cotula *et al.* (2014: 1) suggest that: "land deals have sparked much polarised discussion, in which strong positions are taken on the impacts of such investments on livelihoods, rights, sovereignty, development and conflict at local, national and international levels. The polarisation in the debate reflects radically different views of the best options for poor countries in terms of their agricultural development and policy priorities". Indeed, some analysts have emphasised the possible positive role that large-scale investors can play in agrarian transformations by favouring an agriculture system capable of achieving food security and of ensuring new livelihoods opportunities for the rural dwellers by means of higher productivity and access to adequate technology and inputs. On the contrary, others consider large-scale land acquisition a threat to local livelihoods, and to environmental sustainability, as well as the risk of marginalising the peasantries without contributing to the development of recipient countries (Cotula 2012).

Baglioni and Gibbon (2013: 1559) remind that: "Much scholarly analysis has so far linked this land rush to a more general crisis of neoliberal capitalism, unleashing capital's appetite for new sources of accumulation. According to this interpretation, land grabs are driven by global capital accumulation dynamics and strategies in response to a convergence of multiple crises concerning finance, environment, energy

and food". Indeed: "commonly, 'grabbing' implies a) that smallholders are dispossessed of their land through interventions by outside actors, and b) that this is done by illegal means. Land grabbing has also been interpreted as 'foreignisation' and is seen by many as a neo-colonial scramble for Africa" (Holmén 2015: 459, also for further references). NGOs and concerned activists (such as Grain, Oxfam, Via Campesina, International Land Coalition) represent a radical view by considering land grabbing a sort of neo-colonialism with negative effects on smallholder farmers, that is a capitalist restructuring of global agriculture (Akram-Lodhi, 2012). Less critical actors - including some African governments - see this upsurge in foreign land acquisitions as an opportunity for investment and development, if adequately managed (Deininger et al., 2011; Cotula *et al.* 2009),

Many private investors are involved (often multinational corporation), supported by the governments of their own countries: not only United States and European countries, but also Gulf states, China, South Korea (even if not so relevant in Africa, except for the failed Daewoo project in Madagascar), Japan, Singapore, India, Malaysia, South Africa, Brazil. Middle Eastern investors have certainly been active participants in the global land rush. Saudi Arabia is the largest investor country in Sudan, accounting for about half the land area acquired by foreign investors. Some of them (such as Brazil and South Africa - the latter in Southern Africa is in particular involved in sugar and biofuel industry) are at the same time investors and recipients countries. To sum up this aspect: "Multiple actors seek land: foreign governments, sovereign wealth funds, state-owned enterprises from new (BRICS and other powerful middle-income countries) and old players (OECD countries), private actors such as agribusiness and agrifood companies, corporate players interested in developing biofuels, as well as private institutional investors such as banks and a plethora of mutual, pension, hedge and private equity funds. Again, Africa appears as the ultimate investment frontier, a new paradise where an unlimited supply of land and labour can yield profits in times of crisis" (Baglioni, Gibbon 2013: 1559).

Cotula (2012) reminds how media attention has focused on government-backed entities from the Gulf and East Asia and on Western investment and pension funds as the main land acquirers. However, empirical research highlights the central role of national elites in national acquisitions. According to Fairbairn (2013), the case of Mozambique shows how land grabbing can be the result of actions taken by the state and its elites, not just a process resulting from foreign interests. In Ethiopia domestic investors account for over 60% of the land area acquired in the period 2004-2009 (Cotula 2012). A WB study found that nationals accounted for 97% of the land area acquired in Nigeria, and for about half or more in Sudan (78%), Cambodia (70%), Mozambique (53%) (Deininger *et al.* 2011).

Western companies have been a key player in the global land rush. They are dominant players in biofuels. For example, all of the biofuel projects in Mozambique and Tanzania

were run by European companies, though in one case capital appeared to be mainly held by South African interests. Even if Southeast Asian companies have received far less media attention for their investments in Africa, they have been very active as well as Indian companies (see among others: Hall 2011; Cotula 2012; Holmén 2015).
The debate about land grabbing is still open, and is focusing on topics such as reforming the administration and management of land, transparency of transactions, creation of codes of conduct,[6] and strengthening of institutional capacity of the recipient countries. Some analysts suggest to study land grabbing from the point of view of the relations of land ownership and the structural changes occurring in the recipient countries, transformations that favour the (re)-concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the ruling classes, creating new class divisions and social inequality (Borras and Franco 2010a; Anseeuw *et al.* 2012; McMichael 2012).
Hall warns about a possible form of "South Africanisation" of agricultural structures, shaped by a model where the large-scale property coexists alongside small subsistence farmers living in the shadow of the big companies. She indicates that the situation: "draw into question the (political) purpose of responses from international financial and development institutions, which have tended to prioritise procedural safeguards to curb the excesses of 'grabbing' in the forms of a 'code of conduct' or 'principles to guide responsible agro-investment (...) rather than questioning the paradigm of development that promotes such deals, and the directions of agrarian change that they precipitate" (Hall 2011: 207), an issue that highlights the difficulty of effective international policies of creating a more sustainable governance of the land.

Conclusions

Global agriculture in the neoliberal era would give rise to a new food regime (that of multinationals and large companies and corporations of agricultural production and agro-business) and to the creation of an agrarian question of food (McMichael 2012). Beyond the rhetoric of market-led land reform and the support to small producers there is often a growing crisis of smaller and poorer producers of developing countries (Bernstein 2010: 82 ff.) and new claims for the right to food and food sovereignty.
Even if peasants are struggling against poverty and for accessing adequate livelihoods, they are coping with contemporary challenges and contradictions. In this regard we can agree with Van der Ploeg (2010: 21-22) when he affirms that peasantries in the twenty-first century should be re-conceptualised and understood in terms of "resistance in a relation perspective". A resistance taking many forms in order to get their own livelihoods in a context characterized by high external dependency (Van der Ploeg 2008). This is expressed by the formation of a complex socio-economic system able to generate multiple rural livelihoods. The importance and the potential strength of the peasantries increasingly reside in their capacity to establish and secure food sovereignty. The stronger they become (i.e. the more they actively engage themselves

in different social struggles), the more they will be able to ensure food sovereignty. And in so doing they will transform agriculture with positive effects on the whole society (Van der Ploeg 2014).

However, tensions and conflict over land involving a wide range of social actors are marked by local dynamics and are widespread in African countries. Peasants have to cope with the ongoing processes of transformation if they wish to avoid being destroyed as a class. They continue to seek their independence through the control of local resources and their land, in particular, and by creating local rural networks, in order to ensure their survival and their development within the current process of commodification (Van der Ploeg 2010).

Therefore, in most of African rural societies - which are more and more disarticulated, and at the same time, globalized - struggles against inequalities are relevant: rural movements are linked both to processes of semi-proletarianisation and to conditions that are pushing people to forms of re-peasantisation.

In the Southern African region, the historical legacy maintains the land question a central issue for local and national development. Socio-economic inequalities, and high levels of poverty levels are weakening governments' legitimacy and represent a challenge to the models of economic development promoted for years by governments with the support of the international community, jeopardizing citizenship rights and democracy. Thus, in Southern Africa the ongoing processes of transformation of agrarian societies - occurring because of local strategies and because of the effects of global transformations - have wide-ranging implications for the agricultural sector. In many cases, these implications are directly related to land grabbing through corporatization, financialization, concentration, dualization, and foreignization of the rural space. They also cause a shift towards a dominant corporate-based paradigm and lead to questions regarding the future of small-scale commercial farming within agricultural development (Boche, Anseeuw 2013).

On the one hand, poverty and competition for land favour processes of de-agrarianisation and mechanisms of formation of multiple livelihoods. On the other hand, the ongoing processes of primitive accumulation are producing mechanisms of semi-proletarianisation, social differentiation and, in some case, re-peasantisation. For this reason, in many areas of Africa rural and urban coexist and overlap. This process seems to be the only possible because it allows farmers to maintain access to their land within the so-called traditional land tenure systems as a safety net for their own survival, together with other non-agricultural incomes. This would be a form of informalisation extended to African rural economies, that is what Bernstein (2012) defines "agriculture beyond the farm" and "rural labour beyond the farm".

In conclusions, as Pauline Peters suggests (2013a: 562): "any attempt to understand 'the question of land' in contemporary Africa has to grapple even more than in the past with the dynamics of social transformation at multiple levels - global, regional, national, subnational - that are reshaping not merely access to land itself but the very

bases of authority, livelihood, ownership and citizenship. And in reverse, any attempt to understand the multiple transformations taking place on the continent has to include 'the question of land' as a central element".

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NOTES:

1 - Ruth Hall, *Land policy for the next decade: Taking stock and moving forward,* "Future Agricultures Blog", 12 November 2014: http://www.future-agricultures.org/blog/entry/conference-on-land-policy-ruth-hall (visited 15th December 2015).

2 - Many authors have discussed the issue of the creation of new capitalist producers. Among them, Chimhowu and Woodhouse (2006) have described the role of increasing vernacular markets of the land in Africa in order to identify new forms of class differentiation in the rural areas. Bernstein (2010: 29) reminds us, among many issues, the role of global transformation by saying that: "a minority may benefit as robust petty commodity producers and emergent capitalist farmers supplying domestic and international markets, including in some instances through contract farming arrangements with agribusiness". In this regard, Oya (2007: 459-460) is very helpful by stressing that: "the very coexistence of different forms or varieties of agrarian capitalism from large-scale agribusiness to peasant capitalism, and their shifting fortunes as a result of external and internal dynamics, also underpin differences in the nature of rural capitalist classes and the process of differentiation across countries in Sub-Saharan Africa". He continues by saying that new rural capitalists represent a very diversified group because: "some are the product of differentiation within a class of small-scale farmers or advanced simple (or petty) commodity producers and differ from those agrarian capitalists emerging from the ranks of landed classes and 'bureaucratic bourgeoisies'".

3 - In the case of Mozambique, the 1997 Land Law: "is often lauded as one of the most progressive in Africa» (Fairbairn 2013: 339). Indeed: "the Law attempts the Herculean task of securing community land rights whilst simultaneously facilitating private investment, all within the context of continued state land ownership" (*Ibidem*: 340). In this regard Serra (2013: 59) reminds that the preamble of the law declares that the challenge the country faces for its development requires to offer new models of security of land tenure, with the aim of promoting the use and exploitation of the land. Indeed, land - the more important resource that the country has - should be well utilized, thus contributing to the development of the national economy. For this reason foreigners must get a title of allocation of land by the state. In order to get the land, investors need to organize consultations with local communities. In relation to these processes, the Mozambican Land Law has probably served to control the land rush in Mozambique. The recognition that the law support to peasants' rights has at least allowed to ensure that large-scale investments have been accompanied by some form of consultation with communities. However, there are several important negative evidences, first of all the fact that the consultations of the communities are generally vague and contradictory: communities often do not receive copies of the discussions, thereby making impossible to guarantee that investors maintain their promises (Fairbairn 2013).

4 - Ruth Hall, *Land policy for the next decade: Taking stock and moving forward*, "Future Agricultures Blog", 12 November 2014: http://www.future-agricultures.org/blog/entry/conference-on-land-policy-ruth-hall (visited 15th December 2015).

5 - For detailed case-studies about the region, see the other contributions included in this issue of the journal *afriche e orienti*.

6 - In recent years, one of the attempts to find possible forms of alleviation of the main negative impacts of land grabbing has been to establish codes of conduct for those who obtain land concessions in order to provide better protection for peasants and local communities These efforts, supported by most of the international actors of development, drawing from the broader debate on corporate social responsibility and the search for new and more effective processes of good governance, with reference to land grabbing reckon that: "voluntary adherence by corporations to good business practices and ethical behavior is a cornerstone of this advocacy, and its most recent incarnation arises in the arena of rural development, focusing on access to land and taking the form of proposals for a Code of Conduct for land deals" (Borras, Franco 2010b: 507).

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ISBN 978-88-6086-1252

ISSN 1592-6753

€ 13,00

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