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Land grabs, farmworkers, and rural livelihoods in West Africa: some silences in the food sovereignty discourse

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ABSTRACT

The global land rush has spurred small, modest, and big anti-land grab mobilizations, notably the food sovereignty movement. The movement has been instrumental in representing the interests of small-scale family farmers whose livelihoods are threatened by capitalist control over land in the countryside. However, this dominant narrative tends to overlook or de-emphasize some important diversity within the peasantry. In West Africa, anti-land grab discourses emphasize family farming as a major collective action frame, focusing less on issues related to agricultural wage labour – farmworkers' access to land, food, and decent working conditions. If food sovereignty is to fully realize its potential power as a counter-narrative to neoliberalism, and as a possible democratic alternative for working people with differentiated and at times competing socio-economic interests, then demands that adequately reflect the agrarian struggles of the rural working people have to be put onto the agenda and engaged better than it is now.

KEYWORDS

Land grab; food sovereignty; farmworkers; family farms; large-scale agriculture; ROPPA

Introduction

In light of the global land rush and hegemony of neoliberal approaches to natural resource governance, agrarian justice movements are reviving and suggesting alternative ways of envisioning livelihoods on land (Borras, Franco, & Suárez, 2015). One such alternative approach is food sovereignty¹ which aims to restore and build peasants' control over land, as firmly expressed in the 2007 declaration of La Via Campesina, 'Our land is our identity, it is not for sale ... We need to fight against all forms of expulsion of peoples from their territories and against mechanisms that favour remote, corporate or centralised control of territories ...'. It is for such reasons that the 'land grab' phenomenon has become an effective framing opportunity to raise awareness around the negative impacts of large-scale land investments (Larder, 2015). In West Africa, Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest² (ROPPA) remains the most prominent food sovereignty movement that campaigns for the sustenance of family farms as a counter-narrative to land grabs, and to project an alternative outlook on agrarian futures in the sub-region (Mckee, 2009a).

In this paper, I argue that while such anti-land grabbing discourses by food sovereignty movements reflect historical and contextual struggles for the sustenance of the peasantry beyond survival, the farmer-centred narratives tend to overlook or de-emphasize some important differentiation

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among, and diversity within the livelihoods of the peasantry. Thus this study aims to highlight farmworkers' struggles around land and the exploitative labour relations in rural West Africa. The goal is to elucidate how and why issues of differentiation have been given little attention in discourses against land grabs, and the implications for food sovereignty building.

This study relies mainly on secondary data sources: media reports, newsletters and campaign brochures, and accounts of academics and activist researchers. It is further supported with findings and reflections from an empirical study of the labour relations on a transnational oil palm plantation that employs approximately 200–250 farmworkers in the Volta (Oti) Region of Ghana. The fieldwork in Ghana was conducted in 2018 and 2019, spanning approximately five months. The primary data was gathered through a survey, interviews, informal conversations, observations and focus group discussions with farmworkers on the plantation, management and supervisors, families who leased out their lands, and some local government officials.

Land rush in the context of food insecurity in West Africa

West Africa is endowed with abundant land resources which contribute significantly to its economic growth (Hollinger & Staatz, 2015). For instance, West African smallholders produce 70% of the world's cocoa, and small-scale farming also contributes to over two-thirds of the region's total food production (Wessel & Foluke Quist-Wessel, 2015). Nevertheless, there is high food poverty among farmers and the working poor as well as not disregarding inter and intra-country differences (Hollinger & Staatz, 2015). For instance, in Northern Mali and the Lake Chad Basin, even though food availability is generally satisfactory, civil instability continues to drive severe food insecurity. Also, while market fluctuations affect national food security in Ghana and Nigeria, diverse factors influence the in-country differentiation between the northern and southern divides of the two countries (FAO, 2017), not to mention the fragile ecosystems and droughts in the Sahelian areas (Mortimore, 2003). Family farmers also have to be more productive to meet the growing food demands of urban and rural populations as well as the income and employment needs of rural populations (Bélières, Bosc, Faure, Fournier, & Losch, 2002).

Colonial and Post-colonial policies have influenced the food insecurity in West Africa. Both the shortcomings of newly independent states' food self-sufficiency programmes in the 1960s and the failures market liberalization under the structural adjustment programmes of the early 1980s cannot be overlooked (Burnett & Murphy, 2014; Oya, 2006). The present hegemony of free trade has also influenced states to open up their markets to low-priced food imports – a situation which encourages dumping, alters food preferences, and systemically stifles local production. In the Sahel region of West Africa, foreign foods like noodles that were culturally unsuitable decades ago are now normalized and compete with local foodstuff (Sahel and West Africa Club, 2007).

Consequently, contemporary land deals characterized by both new land acquisitions and existing investments under new contracts are being promoted by states, traditional authorities, communities, and agribusinesses under the rhetoric of increased productivity, growth, and food security. For example, a 2009 World Bank report with a special focus on West Africa, describes the Guinea Savannah Zone³ as 'empty lands' that should be harnessed for investments without adequately recognizing the prevalence and social relevance of shifting cultivation, fallow systems, and pastoralism (see Richards, 2018) and the land needs of future generations.

That said, Western investors and partnerships are critical players in the oil palm and non-traditional export sector in West Africa (Amanor, 2012). Yet in recent years, the so-called rising powers

have also been playing new roles in agricultural investments, with almost one-fifth of land deals in West Africa involving China, Brazil, and India.⁴ In 2011, China launched the West Africa regional office of the China-African Development Fund⁵ (CADFund) in Accra to facilitate and accelerate the industrialization and agricultural modernization in West Africa (Cousins, Borrás, Sauer, & Ye, 2018). Other examples include Brazil's involvement in commercial rice production in Ghana for both domestic and international markets, and other ancillary investments from China in the form of irrigation services, agro-processing, agricultural technology and research in Senegal, Mali, and Ghana (Amanor, 2013; Bräutigam & Xiaoyang, 2009). Evidence from the land grab online databank⁶ also suggests the growing presence of Singapore, Malaysia, and Nigeria in large-scale agricultural investment in West Africa. In all of these developments, the role of national elites cannot be overstated – the state, local agricultural entrepreneurs and traditional authorities who operate on their own and in diverse partnerships with foreign elites to facilitate land deals (Keene, Walsh-Dilley, Wolford, & Geisler, 2015). Many of such partnerships for agricultural land investments tend to put control in the hands of landholding and capitalist elites (McKay, 2017), often to the disadvantage of peasant livelihoods – a condition which food sovereignty movements actively resist.

The resurgence of family farming discourses in West Africa and the rise of the global food sovereignty movement have therefore raised international awareness about the persistence of the peasantry and the implications of capitalist development in rural frontiers (Mckee, 2009b; Moyo, 2016; Zoundi & Hitimana, 2011). Nonetheless, for the movement's influence to transcend agenda-setting and engage in relevant policy interventions, its claims and demands have to be adequately linked to the ongoing questions of agrarian transformations and differentiation within the peasantry as will be illustrated below.

Dominant narratives in the food sovereignty discourse in West Africa

Compared to Latin America, the food sovereignty movement has a less established base in Africa. Nonetheless, numerous organizations, networks, and platforms at national, regional, and continent levels are engaged in food sovereignty related campaigns and advocacy. Their campaigns are not mere replications of the La Via Campesina principles but are often shaped by their local or regional contexts and histories (Gyapong, 2017). For example, whereas land reform is central to the Food Sovereignty Campaign (FSC) in southern Africa due to their history of class and racial oppression (Wesso, 2009), the West African campaign is critical of free trade and thus, calls for equitable integration of smallholders into global markets.

As a network of producer organizations from 13 out of the 15⁷ Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), ROPPA remains the most massive regional mobilization for food sovereignty in Africa (Mckee, 2009a). Through an alliance with La Via Campesina, ROPPA has also strengthened its political recognition and has been a key player in promoting that regional agricultural policies be family farm oriented (Johnson et al., 2008). Since its inception in 2002, ROPPA maintains that it has positioned itself to defend the rights of peasants – referring to men and women, small-scale family farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fisher folks, forest dwellers, indigenous peoples and agricultural and fisheries workers, including migrants, who cultivate, grow, harvest, and process food within a rural community (La Via Campesina, 2013; ROPPA, 2014a). Food sovereignty movements' use of 'peasants' is a strategy to draw attention to the special relationship rural people have with land, to highlight their social and economic rights and political identity, including also, their cultural and religious lives (McMichael, 2015). In the 2006 Niamey

call for West African food sovereignty, ROPPA and its alliances contextualized food sovereignty in West Africa as

the right of every country or group of countries to define their agricultural policies in the interests of their populations, to develop and protect their productive activities and their markets so that they can satisfy the populations' demand for sufficient healthy food which is culturally and religiously acceptable and, at the same time, constitute the basis for fair remuneration of the labour of family farms. (ROPPA, 2006a, p. 1)

ROPPA's vision for food sovereignty in West Africa is inspired by the several post-independence government policy attempts towards food self-sufficiency in the sub-region. As such, ROPPA's demands centre on trade restrictions, against liberalized markets, and to ensure that family farming systems are not taken over by large-scale industrialized schemes. In defence of fair trade rather than free trade, Mamadou Cissokho, the honorary president of ROPPA in 2001⁸ put forward the movement's position: 'We must attack the rules of play! Those who defend free trade have been preparing themselves for it over the past fifty years ... , It is important and non-negotiable that we benefit from the same things in our countries'. Thirteen years on, another leader of ROPPA, Djigbo Bagna, in his response to an interview asking about the challenges of farmers, emphasized the role of farmers in ensuring food security (ROPPA, 2014b). Among other issues, including the lack of purchasing power and the challenge of climate change, he iterated the question of trade, saying 'for me to be well, the selling price should be higher than the production price, and this is the first problem'.

When we turn to the issues of land grabs, campaigns by ROPPA and other national level food movements have advanced in three (3) main interrelated ways. First, land grabs threaten the history, recognition and the valorization of family farms. Mainstream discourses and programmes that promote uncontrolled large-scale agricultural land investments tend to shove family farming to a sub-culture that is under-valued and poorly recognized (ROPPA, 2014c). As further explained by Nora McKeon in a ROPPA newsletter,

Africa's food security is without any shadow of a doubt based on the diversified production models adopted by its millions of family farmers and their links to those who consume their products. There is a severe disconnect between this reality and the model that is being proposed by these corporatized programmes and, alas, enthusiastically accepted by many African governments and the leadership of the AU/ NEPAD/CAADP. There is a severe disconnect between rhetorical recognition of the key role played by Africa's smallholder family farmers and the fact that family farming is portrayed as an archaic model which is incapable of evolution. (ROPPA, 2014c, p. 43)

Family farming covers a broad range of situations; however, they are generally characterized by the particular connection between the structure and composition of the household, assets and farming activities, and they are also generally dependent on unpaid family/household labour (Toulmin & Gueye, 2003).⁹ Family farming makes up a significant share of rural people's way of life in West Africa. Several studies have demonstrated the persistence of small-scale family farming practices due to their adaptability (Gyasi, 1994), robustness (Bélières et al., 2002), and embeddedness in strong family relations and cultural bonds; what Ngwainmbi (2000) refers to as the 'economy of affection'. Contrary to predictions of the demise of the peasantry, family farming persists even under unfavourable policy environments (Amanor, 2012). Carrere (2013, p. 47) has argued that even during the British colonial administration, 'the peasant system was considered a tried and tested method of producing tropical export crops' – e.g. cocoa in Ghana. As such, the purpose of the colonial regime was not to replace the peasant system of production with large-scale schemes completely but to find 'innovative' ways of improving their integration into 'competitive' markets. In comparison to

large-scale commercial production schemes that have emerged since the advance of capitalism, family farms have proven to be relatively more resilient than previously predicted. Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2010) reiterates the persistence of new peasantries with more diversified and resilient strategies in their livelihoods. Thus, arguments that simplistically assume and aim for their liquidation or replacement by large-scale production systems are becoming increasingly less convincing.

Second, peasant or small-scale farmers bear the brunt of land and resource grabs through dispossession and loss of livelihoods (La Via Campesina, 2015; ROPPA, 2006b). This dominant claim is often projected in contrast to mainstream perspectives that show optimism about the development potentials of regulated land deals (see Deininger et al., 2011). The dispossession narrative does not only emerge from the discourses of (West African) food sovereignty movements but also resonates with several theoretical postulations and empirical research on the impacts of historical enclosures and contemporary large-scale land acquisitions (Hall, 2013; Levien, 2013; Fonjong, Sama-Lang, Fombe, & Abonge, 2016; Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Bezner Kerr, 2017). In 2012, the leadership of ROPPA played vital roles in the Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO) committee for food security to reject and suggest alternatives to the World Bank's principles for responsible investments for legitimizing land grabs instead of protecting the needs of family farmers¹⁰ (ROPPA, 2014a).

Internal differentiation within the peasantry is a widely recognized phenomenon in agrarian development – even as this is interpreted differently by Marxist and moral economy perspectives. Food sovereignty movements are often found in contested positions, having to present broad claims and demands in defence of the peasantry as a whole but are also aware of the class struggles and differentiated interests (Edelman & Borras, 2016). When they frame issues broadly, they present the peasantry as a political category that acts as a unifying frame for making known the struggles of the people of the land (McMichael, 2015), but this also increases the tendencies of oversimplifying complex issues.

Third, small-scale farming is often more productive and sustainable than large-scale models. This counter-narrative falls in line with the widely observed phenomenon and the theoretical debate on the inverse relationship between farm size and farm productivity (Lipton, 2006). After Sen's (1962) farm management surveys in India, the relationship between size and yield became central to debates on agrarian development. Critics of the smallholder farming systems often question their productivity, efficiency, and competitiveness. Given the low agricultural productivity in Sub-Saharan Africa, Collier and Dercon (2014, p. 94) caution against the celebration of smallholder farms as a superior model of production. Collier and Dercon do not necessarily disregard the growing evidence of the efficiency of smallholder farms. Nonetheless, from a methodological standpoint, they challenge such efficiency claims, arguing that in Africa, it is usually more of a celebration of the relative successes within small farms than actual comparison with large farms.

However, van der Ploeg (2014, p. 1004) argues that 'when looking at land productivity, – the most important lens from the perspective of environmental sustainability – peasant farms generally achieve higher levels of production per unit of land than capitalist or entrepreneurial farms'. This perspective underlies much of the economic justification for the food sovereignty movements' opposition to land grabs. Resonating with van der Ploeg (2014) is the movement's defence of the capability of family farms to produce (more than) sufficient good food for the households of family farmers and the growing world population. This translates into the 'Africa can feed itself' campaign in West Africa. ROPPA maintains that family farms can feed Africa's growing population, create jobs, and wealth if they are not perceived as backward or as only capable of subsistence and therefore supported with inclusive and bottom-up research and policies (ROPPA, 2014b). Already, about 80%

of the food grown in Africa is done by small-scale family farmers (GRAIN, 2014), so with the adequate support, the continent will not have to rely on large-scale agricultural models.

Family farming is also often implied in the recent discourses on agroecology, whereby peasant practices are seen to be built on contextualized and diversified farming systems rooted in years of long term experimentation, local knowledge and practices that are more climate-resilient and ecologically beneficial than industrialized production models (Pimbert, 2006; Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012). In his interview for the 'vision paysannes' magazine (ROPPA, 2014c, p. 18), Djibo Bagna¹¹ emphasized the complementary nature of the agro-ecological zones in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa and how they support family farming in sustainable ways. These arguments are often made in contradistinction to 'industrialized production methods, which damage the environment and contribute to global warming' (La Via Campesina, 2007).¹²

Certainly, many social and scientific studies caution against the destructive aspects of large-scale agriculture by stressing the prevalence and incidences of excessive waste generation, pollution and destruction of biodiversity, high dependence on chemicals and the growth of herbicide-tolerant weeds as well as other health and social implications (Schneider & Sharma, 2014; Thompson et al., 2006; Woodhouse, 2012). However, within the food sovereignty movement, agroecology does not necessarily conflict with modern science but rejects the pre-eminence of and total dependence on the latter. Thus peasants should have the right to be selective about scientific methods that complement their local practices.

Farmworkers: in the countryside and in food sovereignty narratives

As it has already been established, the promotion of family farms stands tall in the agenda for food sovereignty and in anti-land grab discourses in West Africa. What seems to be lacking in the narrative on the valorization of family farms is a linkage to its diversity and the changes that have occurred over time, especially concerning the labour question. Several west African studies have pointed out to the transformations in the family farming system – the growing fragmentation of large households, nucleation, individualization, and seasonal variation in household dynamics which the idealized descriptions of family farms tend to overlook (NEPAD, 2013; Touré & Seck, 2005).

Also, as a farming system which functions both as a production unit and a complex social organization, family farmers have, and continue to experience changes in their modes of production and reproduction, particularly in the labour dynamics. The literature on family farms in West Africa is scanty, but there is evidence of substantive and complex wage labour relations among family farmers (Amanor, 2010; Van Hear, 1984). Unlike the Russian peasant that Chayanov studied, peasant farming today is embedded in a 'new rurality' (Kay, 2015) and it is in this light that ROPPA envisions, and campaigns for the 'modernisation of family farming to feed Africans, creating jobs and wealth' (ROPPA, 2014b, p. 4)

While earlier research in Ghana by Van Hear (1984) attributed the viability of the family farm as being a fall-back haven for members, recent studies reveal otherwise. Many youths do not find farming attractive due to declining returns, inadequate government support and growing urbanization¹³ that propel them to pursue non-existent off-farm and city jobs (Ariyo & Mortimore, 2012; Richards, 2005). There is also a declining moral economy, intergenerational struggles and control of youth by elders which are manifested on the one hand, in the increasing withdrawal of youth's labour services in family farms, and on the other hand, the increase in land sales and sharecropping (Amanor, 2010). When the youth choose to engage in farming, many would instead become labourers and sharecroppers outside their family lands where their remuneration is guaranteed. In such cases, they also

compete with migrant farmworkers. Some of these family farms are also differentiated in assets and resources. Again, in some cases, wage labour needs may not necessarily emanate from a lack of family labour, rather from expanded reproduction for both consumption and marketing (Bernstein, 2010). There are instances when family farm heads and other household members sell off their labour supply to other farms to supplement family income needs for social and economic purposes. Such incidences usually arise from challenging livelihood contexts related to land degradation (West, 2018), and under unfavourable rural agricultural policy environments (Scoones, 2015; Windfuhr & Jonsén, 2005), as well as the impacts of colonial legacies. As rightly indicated by Bernstein (2010), colonial trends of commodification began with the introduction of cash crops and the forced commercialization of crops, a means of consumption and production which made wage labour supply necessary.

Unlike La Via Campesina Latin America, where farmworkers receive ample attention in food sovereignty campaigns, perhaps because they have more organized associations (Edelman & Borras, 2016), in West Africa, farmworkers most often appear among the list of rural folks or ‘people of the land’. However, in the movement’s demand framings, they are generally conflated with farmers. In the Niamey call for West Africa food sovereignty, the demand for ‘fair remuneration of the labour of family farms’ shows the movement’s interests in beneficial trade (ROPPA, 2006a), but at the same time, it emanates from the ‘unpaid’, ‘small-scale’ ‘family labour – family farms analogy’. Dispossession-focused framings tend to push issues of rural wage workers – their food security, access to land and labour conditions – to the margins of land grab and food sovereignty debates.

In food sovereignty discourses, ‘local-global’ and ‘capitalist-peasants’ narratives of inequality happen to take precedence over other localized issues. All the same, in many West African countries, traditional cash crops are produced mainly by the not-so-poor family farmers, and are based on profitability and expanded reproduction. It is therefore not sufficient to say their capitalist intentions are just a matter of a small degree. Similarly, in outgrower schemes where family farmers are themselves exploited by large corporations, their farmworkers become the final ‘consumers’ of the costs in such contracts – through low wages and tedious working conditions (Baglioni, 2015). In many rural economies with informal labour systems, when a farmer or landless person falls into the labouring class, their power and autonomy plummet. All the same, farmworkers also defy homogenous descriptions and, as mentioned earlier, many of them double as farmers and petty commodity producers (Gyapong, 2019).

For food sovereignty movements in West Africa to adequately address food insecurity and the agrarian struggles of the working poor, the everyday relations between (family) farmers and farmworkers have to be empirically assessed to illuminate the contradictions and intricacies that arise on the ground in efforts to protect labourers and food sovereignty (Bowles, 2013). As Kay (2015, p. 80) argues, ‘the problems of peasant farming and rural wage labour are not unconnected, but rural wage workers raise particular issues that have not yet been fully discussed’.

Dispossession, but also exploitation: differentiated impacts and responses

Empirical evidence has been growing on the political economy of land grabs, revealing the differentiated implications on land relations and land-use changes in rural agrarian societies (Borras & Franco, 2012; Hall et al., 2015). For instance, a study in Ghana by Boamah (2014) showed the significant role of chiefs in determining the impacts of land deals. In one case, migrant farmers who had defaulted the payment of ground rents to chiefs had their lands affected, whereas in another case, migrant charcoal producers who often paid their tributes were protected from dispossession

(Boamah, 2014, p. 419). For farmers who may not necessarily be evicted, they also have to deal with declining farm-gate prices and increasing competition from large-scale investors who are inserted into logistical chains and economies of scale which capture production and displace struggling small-holders (Amanor, 2012). Land grabs exacerbate the predicaments women when land transfers deny them of their usufruct entitlements; when land-use changes and reclassification reduce their land rights, and when land formalization and the compensation packages transform the rules of access to favour men (Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, & Quisumbing, 2012; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003). Nevertheless, the situation could be even more complicated. For instance, in some settings, women advocacy groups show optimism in market-led land policies even when they recognize that the power relations that structure demands tend to favour men. This is because they perceive it as an opportunity for women to circumvent discriminatory customs that limit their access and control over land (Tsikata, 2003).

When land grabs transform land ownership and use, the agrarian question of labour becomes inevitable. How large-scale production schemes result in labour redundancy or generate employment for rural people (especially the land dispossessed) is usually complex (Julia & White, 2012; Li, 2011). The absorption of rural labour is not always assured when there are no matching skills or suitable agribusiness models. Contrary to mainstream assumptions that regulations should facilitate job creation, not only are states unable to effectively monitor employment outcomes, existing regulatory frameworks which are mostly voluntary are also not binding for investors (Gyapong, 2019).

All the same, even in cases where employment is created, job opportunities are often gendered. In a recent study conducted in Ghana, Kenya and Zambia by Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata (2017), there were instances where land deals have created more paid jobs for males, permanent, and highly qualified workers than females and wage labourers. The type of crops grown also determines who gets employed. There is a growing feminization of labour in large-scale horticulture agribusinesses (Dolan & Humphrey, 2000). It is a reflection of the broadening scope of agrarian change in many rural societies, coupled with enabling customary institutions that influence investors' preference for women, deemed to have 'nimble fingers', are less conflictual and more willing than men to accept lower wages (Bernstein, 2010; Kay, 2015). On the other hand, for other crops like oil palm and sugar cane, the task division of labour favours men over women and is therefore accompanied by wide wage disparities. On the oil palm plantation in Ghana, women constitute just about a quarter of the working population and obtain lower incomes than men. They are engaged primarily in loose picking and weeding, compared to men who, also as a result of their physical attributes, can have opportunities in over 12 different tasks. Thus, during seasonal task variations, women benefit less in terms of job opportunities, and a larger percentage of women than men are laid off during the lean seasons (Gyapong, 2019).

At the same time, the existing and sometimes contested institutional contexts within which land grabs occur influence their impacts on the distribution of resources and labour relations. On the one hand, states' imperative toward the accumulation of capital and the maintenance of legitimacy determine the limits of *and* possibilities for large-scale investments. On the other hand, their authority and capacity to regulate land and labour resources for large-scale investment also bring about variegated implications on different classes of labour and rural inhabitants (Fox, 1992; Moreda, 2016; Schiavoni, 2016).

Similarly, customary institutions of land tenure and production systems, traditional practices and norms (e.g. gender roles) also add to the dynamics of impacts. In a study by Amanor (2012) in the cocoa sector of Cote d'Ivoire, although the liberalization of agricultural markets and the collapse of

state marketing boards eroded the bargaining power of smallholders, the small-scale production system of cocoa remained untouched because of the enshrined and well established historical and cultural relations of production. In such traditional institutional contexts, smallholders in cocoa production face fewer risks of eviction compared to non-traditional cash crop sectors (e.g. pineapple cultivation in Ghana). This could have an impact on the extent to which farmers in particular crop sectors would identify with, and be progressive or radical with the notions of food sovereignty. Many critical studies have also exposed how customary institutions of land tenure, norms, and social relations inherently discriminate and marginalize women in their access to and control over land (Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003). For instance, in the Herakles- Volta Red Oil palm land deal in Ghana that I studied, not only did the institution of male authority in families facilitate women's removal from the land acquisition process, women did not benefit duly from the distribution of rents that were controlled by male family heads/representatives.

Thus far, women stand a high risk of being cash-strapped and unable to benefit from land resources fully, and therefore become attracted to wage labour on large-scale farms, even when they have to work under exploitative labour relations (Julia & White, 2012; Tsikata & Yaro, 2013). Women in particular, when incorporated as wage labourers and contract farmers, are often caught in a complex web of being attracted to (seasonal) livelihood diversification and economic empowerment opportunities while at the same time, being exposed to structural vulnerabilities posed by institutions that 'work together' to benefit and marginalize them. In the Ghana case study for example, given the pre-existing customary/domestic institutions, it was not surprising that many women¹⁴ are more concerned about job opportunities and labour conditions than questioning the land acquisition itself¹⁵ Similar accounts have been reported by Levien (2017) and Park and White (2017) in their work in Asia and other parts of Africa.

Every day, men and women affected by land grabs, given different relations of agency, structural and institutional processes, show diverse forms of political reactions, some of which could even undermine the vision of food sovereignty. These often manifest in ways that may not always be as overt protests but through everyday politics, in the form of 'production and action'. Responses toward land grabs 'extend far beyond "resistance" in its many manifestations – to demands for compensation, insertion and even counter-mobilizations against land deal resisters' (Hall et al., 2015, p. 467). Evidence of such occurrences has been reported on the Malibya project in Mali which involved the transfer of 100,000 hectares of land for an irrigation project. Those who lost their land embarked on outright resistance, less landed farmers saw it as an opportunity for improved yields, and the state has even rationalized it as a pathway to national food sovereignty (Larder, 2015). When food sovereignty movements engage with some of these complex realities, it will imply dealing with contradictions of interests but also provoke discussions based on the real experiences, different forms of vulnerabilities and the domestic power relations within which land grabs are embedded.

The changing agricultural values and agrarian futures in West Africa

The issues above reveal the diversity, complexity, and fluidity in the processes of change in rural agrarian systems. It is also becoming quite apparent that some of the tensions between the food sovereignty ideals (of protecting local food systems through small-scale/ family farm production and local consumption) and the interests of its mass base (the rural masses) may also lie in the differences in values and ideologies on how agriculture should be developed to benefit people on the ground. In ROPPA, there is a growing emphasis on the modernization/valorization/professionalization of family farming, although without a clear strategy. This modernization of family farming is usually linked to discussions

on equitably integrating farmers into (regional) markets and promoting demands for their products, yet some farmers may perhaps consider it as an avenue to fully transform their production systems. For instance, a leader of the Ghana national platform of ROPPA (who also coordinated an Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa-AGRA project in Ghana) at some point registered his admiration for commercial agriculture and 'how small-scale farmers could one day be commercial farmers'¹⁶ This is not too surprising given that the class base of the Ghana platform seems to be that of mainly middle-rich farmers. Family farmers may not necessarily practice what is preached about the productivity and sustainability of small-scale farming, even when showing real concerns about their agrarian conditions and struggles. Women and youth are, for instance, attracted to wage work on large farms to meet their daily livelihoods, even when they are aware of the sustainability implications for them and their societies. Again, when some farmers are keen to engage with global markets to improve their livelihoods, some may not be averse to the intensive use of weedicides or experimenting with genetically modified seeds. For example, in Ghana, seeds of contestation have erupted around a planned government introduction of GM cowpea¹⁷ seeds. Whereas Food Sovereignty Ghana (FSG) and the Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana (PFAG) have been active voices through lawsuits and campaigns calling for a complete ban of the introduction of GMOs¹⁸ in Ghana, the Ghana National Association of Farmers and Fishermen (GNAFF)¹⁹ actively support GMOs for food security and poverty reduction.²⁰ Taken together, the food sovereignty discourse should not simply reflect 'the pros and cons of a particular set of technologies, but about politics and values and the future of agrarian society' (Scoones, 2008, p. 315).

Many of these conflicting values may even not conform to particular class interests but emerge out of the changing rurality – peasants' histories, their routes into peasantry and the social contexts that shape their desires, behaviour, and values (Hyden, 1986). Although some may be family farmers by 'choice', for others, peasantry could be just a coping strategy and externally imposed – those who are 'trapped' by poverty-driven urban-rural migration, social and family demands; taking care of the aged or sick, marriage relations and perhaps other economic hardships such as failed business ventures. Many of these examples were evident during my fieldwork in Ghana. If the peasants of today do not compare to Chayanovian descriptions and have diverse *raison d'être*, then it cannot be assumed that they have equal degrees of intrinsic attachment to land. For example, communal, stool²¹ and state lands mean differently to different people of the land, and perceptions of their present and future benefits to the community and how they should be put to productive use may differ. A small-scale 'family farmer' who tills an inherited family land and a small-scale individual farmer who acquired his land through personal purchase could have different reactions to land sale/lease. Economically, those who receive substantial returns from non-farm activities may perceive land differently from full-time farmers. Closely linked is the usually neglected question of what form of attachment do people have to the land? As working owners, absentee owners, workers/labourers, settlers? For landless farmworkers, not only might their economic relationship with land be relatively stronger than that of the 'somewhat pure peasant – family farmers', they could also have stronger relationships to land in its communal logic than in personal terms.

Transcending the dynamic rural systems, the broad socio-economic contexts within which peasants find themselves could also shape their ideologies and interests in food sovereignty and the issues of land grabs. In many developing countries, peasants are still second-class citizens with de facto restrictions on their geographical mobility and with limited access to social services (Edelman, 2013). The extreme levels of socio-economic inequality expressed in the inequitable share of socio-economic infrastructures like schools, healthcare facilities, potable water, electricity, communication technologies, and good transportation networks, bring a very distinct dimension to the fight for

peasants' rights in such contexts. Peasant parents in West Africa increasingly invest in their children's education in the hope that their future working lives would not be spent in peasant agriculture (Bryceson, 2000, p. 44). In my research in Ghana, it was not surprising to find out that almost all of the farmworkers on the plantations had education as their *raison d'être*, i.e. to earn income to either sponsor their own education (often the case of young males) and move to the service sector or sponsor their children (mostly from the accounts of adults, uneducated women workers). A worker stated firmly,

I do not want my children to suffer like me. I will support them if they want to go to school and farm alongside, but not to depend entirely on farming. It is tedious, and the income is not stable. (Fieldwork, 2018)

Overall, these examples iterate the cash needs of peasants in socially deprived and fragile climatic environments, who are squeezed between declining agricultural returns and poor access to basic needs. For most peasants living under such social conditions, their land-related interests in relation to food sovereignty principles, may only be sustained by improvements in the social conditions of their families and households.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the complexities of agrarian transformations within which food sovereignty has to be constructed in light of a raging land rush. Food sovereignty movements in West Africa have to engage better with some of these ongoing changes which are in themselves rooted in international and local political-economic structures but unfortunately, have become the lived realities of the diverse rural working people. It is such a reality that propels the antagonism between food sovereignty and corporate agriculture and at the same time, drives campaigns for the valorization of peasant food systems. However, these ongoing agrarian transformations have also influenced the differentiation of the peasantry, including the landed and landless farmers and farmworkers, petty commodity producers, migrant workers, women, and other minorities groups who may have diverse experiences and interests in land deals. This is usually accompanied by diverse and unpredictable short-term livelihood strategies, some of which may even challenge the vision of food sovereignty. Hence, for food sovereignty campaigns to have more significant influence beyond political mobilization and agenda-setting to reflect the agrarian struggles of the differentiated rural working poor, movement leaders may have to engage with questions of ongoing rural livelihood transformations. In 2015, ROPPA conducted a workshop with its national platforms, focusing on the observation and monitoring of family farms to strengthen family farm related public policies (ROPPA, 2015). At the workshop, some leaders of the various country platforms shared experiences of their attempts in classifying family farming systems, developing rural identity cards and marking out agroecological zones. This enabled the leaders to have a better view of the regional diversity of family farms and how to approach such observations, but also, presented several challenges in their desires to harmonize the tools of data gathering and results for policymaking.

Indeed, addressing issues of agrarian change uncovers some of the contradictions likely to arise from differentiated interests, as well as provoke debates on issues of representativeness and class alliances within food sovereignty movements. Nonetheless, doing so will bring significant benefits to the cause of food sovereignty. First, it helps to present nuanced claims regarding the adverse impacts of land grabs. In other words, to draw attention to the variegated forms of adversities among the marginalized; beyond family farmers to other classes and social groups that may suffer distinct forms of

dispossession and exploitation across different timelines and space. Second, it will enable movements to engage with structural issues that facilitate land grabs, mainly, the underlying constraints that make them attractive to marginalized groups as well as the institutions that create the enabling environment for such investments at the expense of the livelihoods of the rural working people. Third, the changing ideologies, values, and perspectives on agrarian futures could also be a reference point in education for food sovereignty in peasant communities. We do not have to simply assume that family farming practices are inherently agroecological, especially given that nowadays states promote cheap and subsidized inflow of agrochemicals. ROPPA's knowledge-sharing platforms, including the periodic farmers' university and the Woman's College, could explore these possibilities. Values that are shaped by the broad socio-economic contexts of peasants may transcend the capacities of food sovereignty movements. However, it reminds us that perhaps food sovereignty construction must go hand-in-hand with general improvements in the socio-economic conditions of rural working people.

Notes

1. As an idea advanced broadly through La Vía Campesina a global peasant movement for agrarian justice.
2. Network of Peasant Organizations and producers in West Africa.
3. From western Senegal to eastern Nigeria, and including portions of Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin.
4. <http://www.landmatrix.org/en/>
5. <http://www.cadfund.com>
6. <https://landmatrix.org/>
7. Except Nigeria and Cape Verde, but there are alliances from these two countries.
8. Quoted in (Losch, 2004),
9. <https://viacampesina.org>
10. See Koita, (2013) and Losch (2004) on ROPPA's influential role in leading the resistance by smallholder cotton farmers against unfair international trade policies.
11. President of ROPPA.
12. <https://nyeleni.org/>
13. In the case of Liberia and Sierra Leone, the civil wars of the 1990s influenced the urbanisation of the youth.
14. This is also a general concern for most people interviewed, and it is linked to the broad structural and socio-economic inequality.
15. It is worth noting that in this case, there is a variegated dispossession effect –due to relative land availability and access to alternative lands (although with differentiated degrees of access and control broadly, between sharecropping settlers and native landowners), that helps to maintain their basic subsistence ethic.
16. <http://www.mafs-africa.org>
17. A staple legume in Ghana.
18. <https://rwr.fm/interviews/ghana-government-sued-over-gmo-commercialization/>
19. Like PFAG, the GNAFF is part of the larger Ghana Federation of Agricultural Producers (GFAP) which is the Ghana Farmers Platform represented in ROPPA.
20. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/2017/January-23rd/farmers-back-agric-minister-designate-to-take-up-job-despite-opposition.php>
21. Lands held under the custody of traditional chiefs and kings.

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