

URBAN LAND GRABS

An Overview of the Issues

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Introduction

According to the United Nations, 70 per cent of the world's population would be living in urban areas by 2050 (United Nations, 2018). Foreign and domestic investment flows, as well as the mobilities of people, goods, technologies and ideas, shape the development of megacities, secondary cities and new cities across the globe. These flows transform urban land and the built and natural environments at a rapid pace. The pace of transformation is especially intense in the Global South. For example, urban development in Africa received significant scholarly and policy attention over the past decade in terms of how to achieve equity and sustainability in growing cities (OECD, 2020; Parnell & Pieterse, 2014). In the framework of the United Nations New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, the urgent question is how cities can provide sustainable and inclusive living environments for rapidly increasing urban populations while simultaneously promoting climate change mitigation and adaptation (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020; Zoomers et al., 2017).

In these debates on global urbanization and sustainable urban transitions, the question of land is only generally mentioned at the side-lines (Steel et al., 2019). Discussions on gentrification, displacement, urban renewal and infrastructure development centre on social, physical and economic change in urban environments, yet the question of urban land development, which sits at the very basis of these transformations, is rarely expounded upon or taken as a central point of analysis. We still know very little about how to promote an inclusive urban development that ensures land tenure security and quality infrastructural services for all urban dwellers, especially in a political economic context where the state's centralized 'infrastructural power' is limited (Mann, 2008). In particular, we need a better understanding of how urban dwellers confront and cope with livelihood and land use changes during the process of urban development increasingly accompanied by investments and land acquisitions. How do urban dwellers experience spatial alteration and social segregation, or outright demolition of their homes or settlements, after eviction and displacement resulting from new infrastructural projects and urban resettlements? What are the responsibilities of investors and decision makers in responding to these experiences?

In this chapter, we address these questions through a discussion on the emerging concept of ‘urban land grab’ and by examining the relationship between intensifying urban land acquisitions and the experiences of urban dwellers. We first identify three major types of land investments observed in cities in the Global South: investments in rural and peri-urban land development and real estate; investments in infrastructure development for climate resilience and sustainability; and investments in building new cities (Steel et al., 2017). We explore the relationship between urban dwellers and each type of investment by presenting empirical cases from Khartoum in Sudan, Beira in Mozambique, and Konza New City (near Nairobi) in Kenya. We base our empirical analysis on African cities because, according to OECD (2020), Africa has the most rapid and acute urban population growth in the world. Furthermore, African cities are not just growing in population number and size, but are increasingly becoming the new frontiers for foreign and domestic investment which involve a wide range of private and public actors. Each presents new forms of speculation and commodification of public, private, and customarily-owned land and properties (De Boeck, 2014; Ghertner, 2015; Watson, 2013). As a result, these cases are likely to illustrate both the current and future directions of urban land grabs. Before presenting the cases, the next sections provide an overview of the discussions surrounding investments, global land and resource grabbing and its consequences in the urban context in order to specify what each case seeks to address.

Urban Land Investments and their Consequences

As discussed by urban scholars, the world has been experiencing an era of ‘neo-liberal urbanization’ (Sheppard et al, 2015). In cities across the globe, complex global connections and disconnections transform land markets and often lead to violent social exclusion (Sassen 2014; Shaw 2019). At the same time, the global land and resource grabbing debates surged in the late 2000s with the call to better understand the extensive impacts of large-scale land investments—mostly in agribusiness and nature conservation—on development processes in the Global South (Borras & Franco, 2013; Cotula et al., 2009; Deininger & Byerlee, 2011; Fairhead et al., 2012; Kaag & Zoomers, 2014; Wolford et al., 2013). The concept of urban land grabs emerged in the late 2010s when scholars, questioning the dominantly rural orientation of global land grabbing debates, pointed to similar problems of neo-liberal urbanization, social exclusion and other negative impacts of investments on people’s livelihoods in urban contexts (Zoomers et al., 2017).

In land and resource grab debates, scholars initially paid little attention to the implications of large-scale land investments in relation to rapid urbanization. Meanwhile, the New Urban Agenda, presented at the United Nations Habitat-III Conference in 2016, not only recognized urbanization and its associated impacts—a proliferation of informal settlements, the eviction and demolition of these settlements due to redevelopment, and associated chains of displacement—but clearly laid out the similarities with rural land and resource grabbing impacts (United Nations, 2017). Scholars thus started to recognize that

debates on the global land rush and the New Urban Agenda are taking place in separate containers [... but] cities themselves act as major ‘land grabbers’, as they expand due to population growth, the spread of middle-class lifestyles and suburbanization, speculation, and new city development.

(Zoomers et al., 2017: 242)

Consequently, emerging discussions integrated global land grab debates with urbanization debates to conceptually and practically grasp the implications of global investments for people dwelling in expanding urban land frontiers (Mbiba, 2017). Towards this end, Steel et al. (2017) detailed three dominant investment types that characterize the phenomena of urban land grabs: (1) investments made directly in land, which, simultaneously, are often property investments, especially real estate which is a driving force of private and commercial gentrification; (2) investments in the speculative building of new world-class or ecocities which often fail to materialize yet create very real impacts nonetheless (van Noorloos et al., 2019); and finally (3) investments in public spaces and services, such as networked infrastructure that indirectly affects the real estate market and urban settlement patterns. Due to the Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG11 on sustainable and climate-resilient communities and settlements), these investments are increasingly directed towards infrastructure development for climate mitigation and adaptation (Shannon et al., 2018).

In most cities in the Global South, where more than half of all urban dwellers are found in areas with no or precarious land tenure, investments in land and real estate, infrastructure and new cities lead to the formalization of land and housing or the upgrading of human settlements. Formalization and upgrading expand the ‘frontiers of land commodification’ (Kelly & Peluso, 2015) and create private properties, eliminating customary access to land and livelihoods for the majority of urban dwellers (Ghertner, 2015; Otsuki, 2019). For example, most informal settlements in Africa (which can host up to 60% of a city’s population) have historical roots in the colonial period when a city emerged as a set of racially segregated spaces; in the post-colonial period, the majority of the new citizens became informal settlers (or ‘squatters’) on the public land who have nonetheless kept customary land user rights in these settlements under the new national government’s ‘benign neglect’ (Otsuki, 2016). This means that the recent commodification of land has far-reaching impacts on urban dwellers who rely on cultural arrangements to make a living in the informal settlements (Bird et al., 2017; Shih, 2017). Nonetheless, in contrast to the rural land grab debate, where large food and biofuel corporations are clearly considered to be the powerful and known ‘enemy’ of smallholders and local populations, the influence of a multitude of players involved, for example, in urban real estate deals, is not easily traced in an urban context (van Noorloos et al., 2018). Or, as Rodgers and O’Neill (2012) point out, infrastructure could turn ‘violent’ when it physically oppresses or displaces people or symbolically makes structural inequality visible, yet it is ‘ostensibly nobody’s fault’.

The elusiveness of ‘structures of responsibility’ characterizes the phenomenon of urban land grabs (Ferguson, 2012). In order to address this elusiveness, we first need to get a better grasp on the players involved in particular city investments and how economic and physical displacement make such investments exclusionary for different groups of people. Then, we need to find pathways that turn the ‘grab’ into more inclusive urban development which involves various actors and citizens who otherwise cope with the effects of the grab (Otsuki et al., 2017). In what follows, we present three case studies of African cities reflecting the three major types of land investments observed in cities in the Global South: investments in rural and peri-urban land development and real estate; investments in infrastructure development for climate resilience and sustainability; and investments in building new cities (Steel et al., 2017). The following case studies are elaborated based on authors’ previously published works and field research.¹ By way of these empirical examples, we explore the types of investors, land users and other actors affecting and being affected by the investments.

Land Grab Experiences in African Cities

Investments in Urban Land and Real Estate: The Case of Khartoum, Sudan

In Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, various international, national, public and private actors have purchased land to profit from the high land prices in the centre and the more peripheral areas of the city. Under Omar Al-Bashir's authoritarian regime, the Sudanese government encouraged foreign investors to establish private partnerships with national corporations in order to invest in land and real estate in Khartoum. By encouraging these types of public-private partnerships, the state attempted to maintain control over the activities of international companies and to chip in on some prestigious projects. Investors from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States became especially important players in Khartoum's land and real estate markets by teaming up with national counterparts for commercial and residential development projects (Cromb , 2009; Choplin & Franck, 2014). They have converted the riverbanks at the confluence of the White and the Blue Nile into mere commercial investment sites from which traditional farmer populations have been excluded.

On a more individual level, Sudanese diaspora (e.g., those working in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States) became important investors in Khartoum's lucrative land and real estate markets. In anticipation of returning to their home country in the future, they invest money earned abroad in land and real estate in their hometown. As such, real estate projects have attracted Sudanese migrants living abroad interested in buying up town houses, apartments and villas in gated communities (Elhadary & Ali, 2017; Klaufus et al., 2017). By circulating adverts at Sudanese embassies and on social media platforms used by Sudanese diaspora, the Khartoum state government is also actively recruiting potential buyers among the Sudanese diaspora for the so-called empty lands in the outskirts of the city (Kaag & Steel, 2019). These so-called empty lands are registered by the state government but are not yet developed as envisioned in the Khartoum Structure Plan (KPP5, 2010). These registration processes have already resulted in a couple of concrete displacements in the planning phase. Urban farmers, internationally displaced people and other migrant populations who lived there as tenants or 'squatters' without formal agreement have been pushed away from these provisioned and materialized investment sites (McGranahan et al., 2020).

In other words, land and real estate have become the main drivers of Khartoum's political economy afflicted by a lack of oil revenues (due to the secession of South Sudan from Sudan in 2011) and the lack of hard currency (due to a number of international sanctions and trade barriers). A new dimension of these urban land dynamics has resulted in light of the overthrow of the 30-year authoritarian regime of Omar Al-Bashir in April 2019. With the military-civilian transitional government that is currently ruling the country, land investors from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States might lose the protection they received from the former regime through long term and tax free lease contracts. In the post-revolutionary city, many land sales and even land confiscations are taking place. In combination with an inflation rate that is running at over 200 per cent (Schipani, 2021), middle-class people and beneficiaries of the old regime sell land because they are in direct need of cash. Also, political elites and foreign investors sell their land and real estate projects because they are afraid their land may be confiscated once the obscure ways the land was acquired becomes clear.

Two questions arise: what is the role of new flows of foreign capital in this opaque and unpredictable urban land nexus, and what kinds of inequalities might reproduce or be

generated? Especially due to Sudan's removal in December 2020 from the US list of state-sponsored terrorism, the transitional government has high expectations of the Sudanese diaspora (UNDP, 2020) as well as private foreign investors in land, real estate and urban development in general. Looking to Khartoum's past, it is not likely that residents will benefit equally from these developments. At least the currently high number of politically and economically vulnerable populations—including migrants, conflict-displaced persons and low-income tenants—run the risk of further exclusion from and discrimination within Khartoum's land and real estate markets (Mcgranahan et al., 2020).

Investments in Climate-Resilient Urbanization: The Case of Beira City, Mozambique

The port city of Beira, Mozambique, located on the coast of the central Sofala Province, is home to roughly 500,000 people. Beira is often described as Mozambique's second most important city due to the economic significance of its port and the city's fierce culture of political opposition to the central state. It is also widely known as one of Africa's most climate vulnerable cities due to its extreme susceptibility to urban flooding and tropical storms, such as the particularly devastating Hurricane Idai in 2019. As Mozambique rises as a 'growing frontier market' for international investors (Kirshner & Power, 2015), Beira has become the focal point of foreign investment and international donor support with the aim of enhancing the city's climate resilience through a range of infrastructural investments and institutional interventions.

Among the various donors, the Netherlands has established a particularly ambitious and controversial partnership with Beira's municipality to restructure the city (Shannon, 2019). Designed by Dutch engineering firms, the Beira Masterplan details a vision of formal and resilient urbanization for the year 2035. In line with the Netherlands' 'retoliberal' aid agenda (Murray & Overton, 2016), the Beira Masterplan is premised on the promotion and subsidized involvement of the Dutch private sector during its implementation. Since its publication in 2013, a range of Dutch-funded interventions followed up the Masterplan in the realm of infrastructure development, spatial planning and cadastral reform. The Beira Masterplan was recently incorporated as a best practice in Mozambique's national review of the Sustainable Development Goals, which mentions it as Mozambique's contribution to building a sustainable and resilient city following SDG11.

One vision outlined in the Masterplan turns Beira's wetlands into lucrative real estate zones. The city's wetlands and its abundance of water have been at the basis of a vibrant sector of urban and peri-urban agriculture, particularly rice cultivation. The distinctly women-led institution of urban agriculture has been practised for generations in wetlands located throughout the city (Sheldon, 1999), buffered from competing land claims and providing a crucial contribution to urban poor livelihoods. Although data is limited on the extent of agricultural land use, 2013 land use maps estimated that total agricultural land within the city limits was comparable in size to built-up areas. The Masterplan's vision is inevitably premised on displacing these urban and peri-urban farmers. The Masterplan, assuming that all of the city's agricultural land will be converted into other uses by 2035, thus implies the total erasure of urban farms and the socio-cultural institutions underpinning it.

The erasure of urban agriculture is reflective of a broader anti-urban agriculture agenda that the municipality has been pursuing under the current leadership (Shannon et al., 2021). Breaking with decades of government support to urban agriculture in Mozambican cities

(Sheldon, 1999) and its own potential function as offering ‘green spaces’ in cities (Contesse et al., 2018), farming is now depicted as a backward and transient practice that does not contribute to the sustainability trajectory envisioned in new infrastructure development projects. Based on a contentious understanding of Mozambique’s legal framework, farmers have been cast as temporary care-takers as opposed to legitimate rights-holders to their land. This discursive shift allows property developers unfettered access to urban agricultural land, without the need for consent or value-based compensation. As such it bears similarities to the myth of empty land in Khartoum and ‘unused’ land that has been leveraged to legitimize large-scale rural land grabs more broadly throughout the Global South.

For many Dutch and municipality stakeholders, the displacement of farmers is seen as a necessary evil towards the creation of a modern and resilient city. A city which they argue will be accessible to all of Beira’s residents through the inclusion of low-cost housing developments, which, in reality have firmly targeted a middle-class minority. Thus, not only are Beira’s farmers facing systematic displacement, they are doing so in service of an urban vision that is in no way accessible to them. Instead, landless farmers find themselves in a heightened state of vulnerability in the shadows of the new sustainable and resilient city, forced into other precarious sectors, such as street hawking, that are susceptible to municipality crack-downs and further displacement.

Investments in New City Development: The Case of Konza Technopolis New City, Kenya

In the past 15 years or so, new ‘world-class’ cities are arising from scratch in an increasing number of African cities; these developments often take the form of public-private partnerships which involve a large variety of actors with sometimes ambivalent and contradictory roles (Carmody & Owusu, 2016; Côté-Roy & Moser, 2018; Keeton & Provoost, 2019; van Noorloos et al., 2018; Watson, 2013). While some of these cities are actually built, in many places, including many ‘smart’ and ‘eco’ cities in Asia, new utopian towns remain a drawing board exercise (van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018). One example is Konza Technopolis, a new city emerging roughly 60 kilometres south of Nairobi, Kenya. The project, aiming to firmly establish Kenya’s position within the global economy by developing a hub for technological innovation and development, also provides residential, commercial and service areas. Typical of such new cities, Konza Technopolis is managed by a Development Authority, a semi-governmental institution which partners with a number of mostly international private developers (Konza Technopolis, 2015). The Authority leases out land to developers for 99-year terms and provides basic infrastructure and regulations (van Noorloos et al., 2019). Similar to Beira’s redevelopment, Konza Technopolis reflects a ‘high-modernist’ master-planned urban project.

These high-modernist projects represent ‘bubble urbanism’ (Steel et al., 2017): speculative projects whose actual purpose is not simply creating actual living or working spaces, but to mostly create an image and attract wider investment (Goldman, 2011). Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that these projects create very real impacts. New cities tend to take place at the rural-urban interface, and therefore impact on people’s resource rights and livelihoods in these hybrid regions. In many cases, this may mean direct dispossession or eviction, but displacement can also take place in more indirect ways.

The 5,000-hectare (ha) Konza Technopolis site, including its planned buffer zone of 20,000 ha, sits on arid and semi-arid lands where pastoralism is an historically important livelihood. The buffer zone was established around the project to prevent ‘informal’

settlement. As a result of new building standards and land use plans for the area, two communities inhabiting this zone have been dealing with livelihood insecurity and potential indirect displacement. Furthermore, before the actual construction of the city started, indirect displacement took place as a fence was placed around the project impeding the partly mobile pastoralists. At the same time, the fame of the new city has attracted new inhabitants looking for opportunities including new groups of vulnerable migrants along with land speculators and developers (van Noorloos et al., 2019). It is clear that the place started to change and co-evolve in complex and non-envisioned ways as soon as the new city planning was announced.

This pre-construction speculative effect also shows the importance of having a long-term view of new city planning—and urban land grabs overall—and of following the impacts on different groups of land users over time. For a long period of time, hardly any development took place at the Konza site; despite the government's high ambitions, the project has long suffered from delays and intra-governmental conflict (van Noorloos et al., 2019). Nevertheless, land and livelihoods impacts were obvious. Only in 2020, when the project's first phase was originally planned to be finished, did the Development Authority establish the first road, water, sewage and communications infrastructure. Since the Chinese Huawei and South Korean investors, in collaboration with the Kenyan government through concessional loans, started to build a data centre as well as a science and technology centre, there seems to be more momentum for additional investment (Konza Technopolis, 2020). For example, development of the large-scale Thwake dam project is underway in the area to provide Konza Technopolis with water (Kenya News, 2020; China Daily, 2021). Yet, such a dam construction may induce new chains of displacement, accelerated by attraction that might be set in motion in the buffer zone and surrounding land once actual investment intensifies.

Key Issues of Urban Land Grabs

From the three cases, two key issues of urban land grabs emerge. First, all of the cities involve complex alliances that have been created to realize the investments. Specifically, all three cities attract investments by foreign investors including from wealthy individual diasporas, companies from traditional donor countries in Europe and from emerging economies, and international financial institutions and development cooperation mechanisms. In discussions on the rural land grab, these dynamics have been associated with the 'foreignization of space' pertaining to land acquisitions (Zoomers, 2010). However, the three cases also show that the foreignization of urban space is duly underpinned by different coalitions of domestic and international actors; the national governmental regime facilitates or impedes particular types of foreign investments in Khartoum while national commitments with the international sustainable development agenda and the municipal government's development plans facilitate the donor involvement as seen in Beira. Finally, the national ambition to create a new city attracts tech companies and other speculative activities as seen in Konza Technopolis. Even though such foreign-domestic coalitions were also observed in the rural context (e.g., Fairbairn, 2013; Schoneveld, 2017), urban land investments go beyond national elite and a few investors to involve quite a diverse combination of partners from inside and outside the countries where the deals materialize. The coalitions span across global and local scales, private and public investors, and individuals and organizations.

Second, each investment led to some form of economic or physical displacement of people 'in the way' of new land development (Oliver-Smith, 2010). In particular, all cases demonstrate

how investments set complex dynamics of displacement—both physical and economic—in motion through the legitimization of new land users and the delegitimization of particular land users such as farmers and pastoralists who do not fit into the new masterplans. In addition, displacement takes place before the masterplans actually materialize, as seen in the case of Konza Technopolis. And after cities are built and infrastructure is developed, displacement leads to resettlement within the city or its periphery which displaces additional sets of people and land uses (Beier et al., 2022; Shannon et al., 2018). As such, research on urban land grabs should incorporate different aspects of displacement beyond direct forms of eviction associated with urban renewal and gentrification which unfold over a long period of time and across multiple spaces (Bird et al., 2017; Ghertner, 2015; Shih, 2017).

The diversity of actors involved in investments, various groups of people displaced by the investments, and the longitudinal effects of investment plans and projects, combine to make political engagement around urban land grabs complicated. The complications require researchers, policy makers and development practitioners to collaborate and make further efforts to map out actors and impacts of displacement, as well as to establish long-term collective engagement to address the impacts by identifying responsible actors in each specific urban context.

Conclusion: Addressing Urban Land Grabs Through Deeper Academic and Political Engagement

This chapter has drawn from the experiences of three African cities to highlight emerging issues around urban land grabs. These cases were selected based on the three dominant investment patterns in urban land development, namely: investment in land and real estate; investment in infrastructure; and new city investment. We have summarized the issues through two avenues: (1) the multiplicity of actors involved in investment; and (2) the various forms of displacement caused by investment. Together, these issues obscure responsibilities related to addressing displacement which often causes social discontent if not outright conflict, impoverishment of the displaced and chains of displacement due to resettlement; all generate acute grievances, but unclear responsibilities between actors in the investment process hinder sustainable outcomes for affected communities.

The rural land grab debate has made some progress in generating discussions about how to address the negative impacts of land investments between non-governmental and advocacy organizations and banks, international organizations, and donors.² While guidelines exist in the context of agribusiness investments or involuntary resettlement, they still largely apply to the rural context (Koenig, 2018). As a result, clear guidelines or frameworks to address urban land grabs do not yet exist. While SDG11 on ‘making cities inclusive, sustainable and resilient’ and the New Urban Agenda pay attention to land rights and inclusivity of investments in urban development, they have not led to concrete mechanisms able to hold the financial sector nor international donors accountable for issues such as displacement. The SDGs in general, which lead to multiple investments in sustainable and green infrastructure, new eco city building or economic development more broadly, do not link these investments to land acquisitions and various forms of displacement and resettlement. Consequently, investments are promoted as best practices for enhancing urban resilience (in the case of Beira) or for the high-tech transformation of Kenya’s economy (in the case of Konza) without mentioning their diverse effects over time.

As researchers, we need to reveal the multitude and ambivalent array of actors around urban land investments and their relationships with various types of displacement and other consequences. Displacement in the urban context also needs to be understood through its impacts on diversified livelihoods (Zoomers & Otsuki, 2017) which may not be directly affected by land acquisition but nonetheless are impacted by land value and built environment changes, in reduced accessibility to certain areas as well as altered ecological conditions. We should then clarify investors and identify the chain of effects caused by investments as well as support governmental entities, donors, and the international agendas and agreements that these actors use to justify their investments. By taking these steps, we could potentially outline new guidelines and agendas for addressing urban land grabs.

Notes

- 1 More specifically, the case of Khartoum draws from field research by Steel; the case of Beira draws from field research by Shannon; and the case of Konza City is reconstructed based on van Noorloos and Avianto (2019) and van Noorloos et al. (2019).
- 2 For example, Netherlands Land Academy (LANDac) has developed multi-stakeholder platforms in which land dialogue takes place; and Food and Agriculture Organization is active in convening various experts from different sectors and organizations to discuss voluntary guidelines for responsible investments.

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