

Impressions of the NVAAS Conference ‘Africa for sale. Analysing and theorizing foreign land claims and acquisitions’, Groningen, 28 and 29 October 2010

I sometimes write about Africa in the course of my research but I’m not an Africa scholar as such – my expertise involves territorial leases and servitudes between nations and their geopolitical effects. The deals many countries have been making to secure large areas of land in Africa for food security have much in common with traditional leases made by treaty, and the Africa for Sale conference gave me many useful insights.

The rapid growth of these deals into a huge phenomenon, and the speed of the political, economic, and social impact they are having, contrasts dramatically with the generally sluggish pace of academic publishing. This limits the availability of scholarly articles and books about these transactions – by the time some things get peer-reviewed or otherwise appear in print (or even electronically), the phenomenon has bounded ahead. A conference like this was extremely good in bypassing these delays and offering an up-to-date set of what others’ research is yielding on a variety of fronts.

I probably speak for many attendees in saying this variety was an important benefit. It doesn’t make sense for me to look at one aspect of the issue – in my case a really “macro” aspect – without having good information about what’s happening at the “micro” level and in between, because everything is linked. For me, the conference defined those links more clearly, and in that regard I hope I was able to contribute a little to the way others look at these land deals as well.

Since Africa is at the epicentre of these transactions, my own further research will inevitably have a strong Africa element. The conference was an excellent place to meet colleagues directly involved in examining the issue on the continent where it counts. I’m sure I’ll have ongoing contacts as a result, and that will be one of the pleasures of having attended. Many thanks to NVAAS for convening it, and for organizing it so well.

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