How national and local contexts shape the impacts of foreign investment in land: a comparative analysis from three African countries

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Recent changes in the global agro–food–energy system – driven in part by consumption trends, climate change-mitigation agendas, and general economic forces – have sparked renewed interest in agricultural investment and a rush to acquire land. The broader socio-economic and ecological impacts of these land use changes are not always clear. Many assessments focus mainly on short-term local-level effects, failing to link changes to the wider agrarian and socio-economic transformations that are underway. Against this backdrop, the objective of the Belmont Forum-supported AFGROLAND project is to analyze how large-scale investments in land and agriculture impact natural resources, rural livelihoods, food security, and public policies in African countries.

Utilizing a cross-country comparative approach –, focused on three country cases in the southeastern sub-region of Africa – we shed light on differences in the national contexts that shape the concrete outcomes and impacts of distant drivers of land use change. Drawing on political science, economy, sociology, geography, and agronomy analytical grids, we apply a mixed-methods approach that combines GIS data, qualitative interviews, participant observation, and quantitative surveys. Our approach enables country-level and cross-country analyses of the dynamics of large-scale agricultural investments.

The project comprises three main lines of inquiry. First, it seeks to understand what drivers and rules of the game serve to pull, push, or regulate agricultural investments at the global and respective national level. Second, it seeks to understand investors' strategies, examining how their business models evolve (or not) in relation to global drivers and national/local governance. Third, it seeks to understand and assess how these agricultural investments impact natural resources, poverty, and food security at the national, local, and household level. This cross-country, comparative approach sheds light on how differences in national contexts mediate and reshape the influence of international drivers of change, determining the concrete outcomes and impacts of agricultural investment.

The project's preliminary results suggest that, given the same international drivers, local-level outcomes can differ significantly – in terms of land use change, ecological impacts, food security, and

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livelihoods –based on national policy frameworks, land tenure rights, the business environment, land and water resource endowments, and path-dependencies regarding investment and business practices. In our presentation, we discuss these differences in terms of business models applied, the success or failure of investments, and their impacts at the local level, considering the three dimensions of sustainable development.

Our presentation contributes to better understanding of how national contexts mediate the impacts of distant drivers on local-level land system outcomes. Further, our results facilitate better understanding of the multi-scale impacts of global agro–food–energy system changes, enabling identification of leverage points for managing sustainability trade-offs and synergies in the global land rush.