SUGAR AGRO-EXTRACTIVISM
Land Enclosures, Contract Farming and the Sugar Frontier in Africa

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Introduction

Large-land acquisitions that promoters have considered as ‘development opportunities’ and critics labelled as ‘land grabs’ escalated in the last couple of decades as a result of converging and mutually reinforcing financial, food and energy crises (Borras & Franco 2012). Their resurgence, which presents historical continuity and changes with previous waves of colonial land dispossession, especially in settler colonies (Martiniello 2017), emanated from broader dynamics of restructuring of the neoliberal corporate food regime dominated by the agro-industrial system (McMichael, 2013; Kay 2017), contributing to alter existing pattern of land tenure and use: from food for national markets to cash crops for international markets, and from forest land to farmland and/or intensive cattle rearing, and mining. Ostensibly, Africa has been the epicentre of ‘a new scramble for land’ (White et al. 2012; Moyo, Yeros & Jha 2012), with countries such as Madagascar, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Liberia, Uganda, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), being among those most affected. According to the Land Matrix, nearly 203 million ha of land were appropriated between 2000 and 2010; 134 million ha of which are situated in Africa, equaling 66% of the appropriated land globally. East Africa is among the most targeted regions in the world, with one-third of the reported projects and area affected. Yet despite several deals emerged from the impetus of finance capital to ensure a secure outlet to store (and eventually increase) value as a result of growing expectations of rising land prices, the majority of large-scale land deals involved actual agro-industrial production around key crops such as maize, soya, cotton, cassava and sugarcane, considered suitable to African agro-environment (World Bank 2009). Further research has shown that the majority of these land deals revolved around crops with diverse fungibility and multiple ends use, that is, food, feed and fuel (Richardson 2015; Borras et al. 2015). The chapter explores the significance of sugarcane cultivation in driving land enclosures and contract farming schemes in Africa, with particular attention to the making of state-capital politico-economic assemblages. It analyses the patterns of expansion of sugarcane cultivation in Africa through the concepts of commodity frontier, flexi-crops and agro-extractivism. Drawing from several case studies in Uganda (Kakira Sugar Works in Busoga, Hoima Sugar Limited
in Hoima and Amuru Sugar Works in Acholi) and Tanzania (Kilombero Sugar Limited in Morogoro), it argues that advancing the sugar frontier has been instrumental in driving land enclosures, generating widespread dispossession and social conflict, on the one hand, and adverse incorporation of poor farmers, on the other, while simultaneously jeopardizing agrarian livelihoods and existing agroscapes and eco-systems. In what follows, the chapter first explores the key debates in the literature on large-scale land acquisitions with a specific reference to the sugarcane frontier as a flex-crops. It then deals with the specificities of contract farming schemes – the nucleus estate plus outgrower model – as a peculiar modality of organization of sugarcane cultivation, focusing on the socio-ecological implications – changing land tenure and use dynamics, patterns of labour mobilizations and nature appropriation/degradation.5

Land Grabbing or Development Opportunity?

The wave of large-scale land acquisitions in Africa initiated in the late 2000s, which international development and financial institutions see as a vector for promoting responsible agricultural investments (FAO et al. 2010) and critics as ‘land grabbing’ (GRAIN 2008), has given renewed vigour to debates over land, food and agricultural issues. The term ‘land grabbing’ generally refers to large-scale, cross-border commercial land deals carried out by transnational corporations or initiated by food-insecure foreign governments (Zoomers 2010). Yet, as the ‘literature rush’ (Oya 2013) proceeded, others pointed to the emergence of more complex political and economic assemblages involving the role of the state, national elites and investors, and local chiefs, and the significance of small- and medium-scale land dispossession (Peters 2013). This consolidated an already-existing trend in which questions of control, access, use and governance of land (and its associated resources) had returned to the core of development discourses among international development institutions (Amanor & Moyo 2008).

Yet large-scale land deals are not epiphenomenal if seen from the perspective of countries in the Global South, entailing both historical continuities and discontinuities with colonial and post-colonial patterns of land dispossession. Land expropriation is not new; rather, it is a reinvigoration and expansion of the long historical phenomenon of capitalist concentration of farmlands under settler colonialism. The newness lies in the trends, processes and justifications, and the political premise according to which land dispossession is currently being framed and legitimated. The World Bank (2009) estimated that 45 million hectares of land have been involved in commercial deals in Africa between 2008 and 2009. This is in part due to the perception that its land is underutilized (Matondi et al. 2011) and thus could be acquired easily with minimal or no payment (Anseeuw et al. 2012). The re-emergence of large-scale land deals brings to the fore the question of renewed competition for natural resources, not simply within the traditional north/south dichotomy, but within a wider geographical spectrum that this time includes BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) (Borras & Franco 2012), which have become new hubs of production, circulation and consumption of agricultural commodities (Cousins et al. 2018).

The transformation of agricultural land into other uses has important implications for the livelihood of smallholder farmers (Anseeuw et al. 2012). Proponents of a critical agrarian political economy perspective argue that land dispossession in Africa is a re-invented form of colonization that has been spearheaded by the World Bank and other international organizations to acquire land in the Global South through a neoliberal lens
(Alden Wily 2012) driven by food and biofuel production, mineral extraction, carbon markets and government incentives (Aha & Ayitey 2017; Cotula et al. 2014). The series of criticisms by critical agrarian scholars, civil society organizations and transnational agrarian movements, and the social struggles which emerged around contested lands have contributed to portray land acquisitions as forms of land enclosures, often involving human rights abuses, extra-judicial evictions, social conflicts, environmental devastations and commons’ appropriations (Martiniello 2021).

Marx’s notions of primitive accumulation (Marx 1976) and David Harvey’s ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003) have been useful to analyse the matrix of violence necessary in triggering new forms of capitalist development. The former highlights the role of ‘extra-economic’ coercion in the forced separation of peasants from their land, the formation of capitalist landed property and agrarian capital, as well as classes of labour. The latter offers a line of argument drawn from Rosa Luxembourg (1913), according to whom, even in a phase of advanced capitalism, capital needs ongoing primitive accumulation to reproduce itself. In other words, capital does not just reproduce itself through the dull compulsion of economic forces. It needs the constant deployment of coercion to create the preconditions for the expansion of capitalist frontiers. Although Marx’s view of primitive accumulation was meant to be transitionary, the persistent socio-economic marginalization and the use of violent means to expropriate and displace smallholder farmers are still ravaging many agrarian economies (Bush & Martiniello 2017) making existing land regimes and agrarian social structures increasingly fragmented and fragilized.

Due to its coercive nature and lack of consultations, land expropriation in Africa is usually met with fierce resistance from the affected communities, a phenomenon called ‘reactions from below’ (Borras & Franco 2013). Such communities often organize against oppression and displacement (Martiniello 2015) or for improved compensation and contracts or employment packages (Hall et al. 2015). Borras and Franco (2013) classify such political struggles into three types: (1) contestation between poor people and the corporate players (resistance against exploitation); (2) contestation between smallholder farmers and the state (resistance against dispossession); and (3) contestation among smallholder farmers (inter- and intra-class contestations). This frame of questions allows researchers to grapple with a multiplicity of social struggles triggered by land deals at different but interconnected levels, and involving a plethora of diverse social subjects, political actors and economic players. It also allows us to understand the ways in which socially differentiated groups and classes negotiate different paths of inclusion and exclusion from these deals.

These reactions from below are often complex and differentiated, highlighting a plethora of responses from below to processes of land dispossession, which range from everyday resistance to demands for better terms of incorporation into land deals or acquiescence. This is important because the initial phase of research and debate on land grab neglected or ignored the political agency of agrarian subjects in shaping trajectories of agrarian change (Martiniello 2015).

Findings from our case studies show that land appropriation represented the precondition for the establishment of large-scale plantations, whether land was conceded during the colonial period by the British Crown to Indian capital to constitute Kakira Sugar Works as in Busoga (Uganda) in the 1930s, or to a partnership of international financial interest and Dutch capital to establish the Kilombero Sugar Company as in Kilombero in 1960 (Tanzania), or in the contemporary neoliberal phase by the Ugandan government such as in Hoima in 2016 (western Uganda). These forms of land appropriation contributed
engendering changes in land property regimes away from customary land tenure systems towards more formalized system of freehold property. Moreover, this would not have occurred without some form of cooptation of traditional land authorities, who materially benefitted from their incorporation in the land deals, and without the manipulation of customary land tenure systems.

In one case, such as in Hoima, dispossession was selectively orchestrated to target women-headed households and less affluent households perceived to be weaker, and therefore more malleable, than other households (Martiniello et al. 2022). In this sense, we find the usefulness of Shahra Razavi’s notion of double exploitation to highlight how capital’s and patriarchy’s combined efforts subordinate women to dual forms of exploitation (Razavi 2009); this is evident in both the selective forms of dispossession and the uneven compensation. In other cases, such as in the case of Amuru Sugar Works in northern Uganda, the establishment of the sugar estate and milling plant on 10,000 ha (24,710 acres) has been resisted by local communities, especially women, for more than a decade starting in 2011 (Martiniello 2015).

Empirical evidence also shows that land enclosure is intimately tight to processes of displacement, de-agrarianization and a shift in the modes of livelihood. In Hoima, for example, 390 evicted families from 1,200 acres (485 ha) turned to internally displaced people camps for lack of housing alternatives or adequate compensation, witnessing a massive deterioration in their living conditions. In northern Uganda, the Atiak Sugar Works state-supported project on 10,000 ha (24,710 acres) has become the fulcrum of massive land contestation, land disputes between families, evictions, arrests and community tensions in 2018.

**Enclosures and the Sugar Frontier**

Crops such as maize, soya, cotton, cassava and sugar were identified as high-potential cash crops by the World Bank (2009), which has represented a global call for investors to exploit the emerging economic opportunities in global agricultural value chains. Further research showed that 58% of the land acquisitions concentrated around a selected number of crops which could produce simultaneously multiple end uses such as food, feed and fuel (Richardson 2015), therefore offering opportunities of portfolio diversification and offsetting the risks associated with monocropping. Sugarcane is one of the paramount crops at the heart of this process of land appropriation and agricultural restructuring in Africa driven by the growing sugar and ethanol demand and consumption in the world. It has been estimated that in southern Africa alone, six million ha are available and suitable for sugarcane cultivation, an amount significantly larger than 1.5 million ha cultivated across the African continent in 2012 (Watson & Puchase 2012). At present, Sub-Saharan Africa contributes about 5.7% of global sugarcane production (FAOSTAT 2021), although this proportion is said to be rapidly growing (Watson & Puchase 2012, see also Hessa et al. 2016).

Much of this growth is occurring especially in Southern Africa where sugarcane production covers more than half a million hectares and the quantity of total harvested cane increased by 80% in the last 20 years (Dubb et al. 2017, p. 2). Countries including Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Tanzania are often seen as offering the best potential in terms of land availability, whereas Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, the DRC and Uganda are seen to offer optimal agro-ecological conditions and production potential (Martiniello 2021). The boom in sugarcane cultivation is also part and parcel of a broader interest on the part of the International Financial Institutions and others in promoting the spread of global
agricultural value chains in Africa, based on the assumption that Africa is home to some of the largest tracts of ‘underused agricultural land reserves in the world’ (World Bank 2009).

The new interest in sugarcane cultivation in locations throughout the continent stems also from its role as a ‘flex-crop’ with numerous end-use possibilities, including ethanol, ‘green electricity’ and bioplastics (Borras et al. 2015). Such flex-crops allow agribusiness companies to diversify their products portfolio, reducing risks against the price oscillations connected with production and marketing of a single crop and maximizing returns from every single cane (McKay et al. 2016; Martiniello 2015; 2016). The boom in sugarcane cultivation is also connected to expanding domestic and regional markets, new access to land and water, sugar’s suitability to tropical and subtropical climates, and low costs of production.

South African sugar giants and the associated modes of production, discipline of labour, coordination with contracted farmers, and capture of resources, have been playing a major role in spreading sugarcane cultivation in Southern and Eastern Africa (Richardson 2010; Hall 2011), further contributing to the consolidation of global agro-food value chains and the role of South Africa as a hub of production and circulation of agri-commodities (Cousins et al. 2018). In 2013, Illovo Group’s ownership structure included: 100% of Illovo Sugar SA; 76% of Illovo Sugar in Malawi; 90% of Maragra Acucar in Mozambique; 60% of Ubombo Sugar in Swaziland (now eSwatini); 82% of Zambia Sugar; and 55% of Kilombero Sugar in Tanzania. In doing so, Illovo progressively acquired quasi-monopolistic control of significant shares of sugar industry production: 100% in Malawi; 93% in Zambia; 40% in Tanzania; 35% in Swaziland; 30% in South Africa; and 21% in Mozambique (Martiniello 2015). Changes in the pattern of commercialization and marketing underpin the current expansion and location of agribusiness in the continent as Illovo’s marketing strategy is in fact increasingly based on growing domestic markets, which represent 63% of total sugar sales (Illovo 2013).

Interestingly, the countries where Illovo is expanding its operations are also ranked as those with the highest per capita consumption rates at a global level: South Africa (6th); Swaziland (10th); Malawi (11th); Tanzania (13th); Zambia (14th); and Mozambique (15th). Another driving factor may have been the growth of domestic retail sugar prices. In 2012–2013, the SADC domestic retail prices were among the highest when compared with global standards: Zambia (4th); Mozambique (7th); Tanzania (10th); Malawi (12th); Swaziland (14th); and South Africa (15th). Though domestic prices, and global levels of consumption, explain to a significant extent the boom of sugar in the region, growing ethanol markets and the development of biomass economy have played an important role too. In a context of growing socio-ecological concerns about climate change and search for renewable sources of energy, the versatility of selected crops and commodity use allows companies to diversify their products portfolio, reduce risks associated with price oscillations and volatility and exploit the conjunctural market opportunities (Borras et al. 2015). The combined effect of improved production methods, the sustained application of science into technological innovations that suit agribusiness’ exigencies in exploring potential new terrains of accumulation and the changing commercial and marketing strategies severely restructured the agricultural sector simultaneously expanding the fungibility of certain crops and widening the spectrum of opportunities that the agricultural sector presents in the region.

In southern Africa, the politics of flex crops is still in its infancy as only 7% came from downstream production and energy co-generation (Mckay et al. 2016). Yet the dynamics of investment in the sugarcane bioeconomy are shaping the current possibilities for companies
to combine the production of refined sugar with other non-food products. The downstream operations are concentrated in South Africa – namely, at the Sezela complex and the Merebank plant in Durban, and the Glendale Ethanol Distillery on the KwaZulu-Natal north coast, though new plants have also been developed in Malawi where molasses is supplied for fuel and potable alcohol (Illovo Sugar Limited 2013); in Swaziland in projects of co-generation of electricity; in Zambia in an ethanol plant to serve the domestic fuel market (Mckay et al. 2016); and in Tanzania where a new ethanol distillery has been operating since October 2013 in the production of extra neutral alcohol (Martiniello 2015). By further investing in value addition to its core products of fibre, sugar and molasses, Illovo is simultaneously expanding sugar production and differentiating its arrays of downstream products, which now include ethanol, flavouring products, syrups, furfural alcohol, agribusiness products, extra neutral alcohol and power co-generation. Yet the fact that the majority of the company’s revenues come from sugar sales is both an indicator of high-margin profitability within the sugar sector, especially in countries which present optimal agro-ecological conditions such as Tanzania where sugarcane yields are among the highest in the world (Nkonia & Barrero-Hurle 2012).

Yet African farmland suitable for sugarcane is at the centre of major inter-capitalist rivalries in accessing natural and human resources (land, labour, water) and capturing local markets – as showed in the case of dumped Brazilian sugar and chicken imports in southern Africa, or the development of the 6 million ha ProSavanna mega-project (Borras et al. 2011), developed as a result of Japan-Mozambique-Brazil cooperation, but resisted by local communities and rural social movements in Mozambique (Shankland & Goncalves 2016). Indian investments in sugar plantations are essentially based on private capital, and their significance especially in eastern Africa is the result of political and economic ties forged by Indian capital during colonialism and re-energized in the late neoliberalism. The Brazilian public–private partnership in sugar production, experimented in the Cerrado and, currently, exported to Mozambique, is characterized by large-scale mechanization projects, and increased reliance on migrant workers (Sauer & Pietrafesa 2012). Other investments in sugarcane cultivation, mainly driven by South African capital, opted for a business model based on the integration of large-scale nucleus estates with outgrowers and contract farming schemes (Hall 2011). It is to the latter that we move our attention in the next section.

The Socio-ecological Implications of Contracting Sugarcane Farming

The dispossessing and/or displacing effects of one-off mega-deals have been a key concern and focus of research for critical scholars and activists. A significant amount of scholarly work concentrated their analysis to una tantum large-scale land deals, which often culminated in outright forced evictions. The unintended effect of this research trajectory has been to detract attention from small-scale, every day and long-term dynamics of land dispossession, for the epiphenomenal focus of much of the scholarship on land grabbing limited the analysis of the social structures of accumulation and dispossession already at work. An alternative trajectory to the primitive accumulation mode of agrarian transformation is represented by a bifurcated agrarian structure in which export-oriented corporate driven industrial agriculture sits side by side with a peasant subsector within a social configuration in which ‘production is undertaken by peasants, not for peasants’ (Akram-Lodhi et al. 2009, p. 228). Contract farming has been framed as an alternative to land grabbing (Cotula and Leonard 2010) and as a vehicle of collaborative business models and a catalyst of inclusive development (FAO 2013), finding
increased political legitimization among governments, donors and transnational corporations, as claims of inclusivity allow them to repeal allegations of land grabbing by advocacy and civil society groups (Martiniello 2017, p. 12).

And yet critics have cautioned against the widespread assumptions that outgrower models are generally better than upright land acquisitions in terms of dispossession or impact on livelihoods (Vicol 2017). Studies of outgrower schemes based on sugarcane cultivation in Africa have questioned win-win assumptions showing a more complex set of dynamics, including: the creation of new dependencies and power relationships particularly in relation to land access in Malawi (Adams et al. 2019b), the shift from broad-based to narrow-based livelihoods on the Zambian sugar belts (Manda et al. 2020), the differential and adverse incorporation of petty commodity producers in vertically structured value chains in the Kilombero valley in Tanzania (Martiniello 2017); the gendered nature of the process in Malawi and the health and work implications in Mozambique (Adams et al. 2019a; O’Laughlin 2017).

To avoid dichotomous and Manichean characterization of land enclosures and contract farming, I analyse them as an expression of the expansion of the sugar commodity frontier (Patel & Moore 2017) and the corporate interest in ‘value-chain agriculture’ (McMichael 2013), entailing a process of re-territorialization of a new land use and division of labour that selectively incorporates farmers and workers, resources and geographical spaces into the capitalist metabolism. Through outgrower schemes, in fact, agri-business companies can bypass the limitations over land ownership, indirectly controlling huge portions of land (see Adams et al. 2019b) and turning contract farmers into ‘little more than propertied labourers’ (Watts 1994, p. 33). As ‘factories in the fields’, sugarcane agro-industrial complexes impose a re-organization of social relations over lands and spaces through a unique ‘military’ discipline in terms of agricultural calendar, times of harvest, flows of commodities, and associated rhythms and times of labour (Richardson 2015). In this sense, contract farming schemes act as a transmission belt of the productivist and (agro)extractivist (eco)-logic characterizing the operation of agri-business capital, contributing to the maximization of value extraction from nature at a cheap cost.

Contrary to economistic discourses that interpret contract farming through institutionalist and technicist lenses that depoliticize it by isolating them from the socio-economic and ecological structures and power dynamics in which they are embedded, I link the rising significance of contract farming to processes of global restructuring of industrial agriculture, interpreting it as an instrument that deepens the division of labour external to the firm and cheapens the production costs that would occur under direct production. More specifically, I link the social dynamics of contract farming to the operation of the booms and busts of the sugar commodity frontier in Patel and Moore’s sense of ‘encounter zones between capital and all kinds of nature – humans included’ (2017, p. 18). These frontiers expand through the constant mechanism of cheapening, that is, reducing costs of doing business. But frontiers are also the place where political power is exercised (and contested) to produce nature at low cost, transforming socio-ecological relations and producing more kinds of goods and services that circulate through a growing series of exchanges (Patel & Moore 2017).

Empirical findings from several case studies in Uganda and Tanzania allow us to maintain that the proliferation of outgrower schemes contributed to produce a dramatic shift in the agrarian geography, eco-system, labour relations and livelihoods of the region, a process which I term ‘sugarification’ (Martiniello 2021). This descriptive notion does not simply capture the exponential expansion of land acreage under sugarcane, or the
expanding numbers of sugarcane outgrowers. It rather places an emphasis on the political, economic, ecological and discursive processes that are advancing the sugar frontier on the continent. The expansion of acreage under sugarcane has in fact been substantially fuelled by governments' politics of licence granting to new entrants (millers) in the sugar market with the declared objective of decreasing sugar consumer prices and expand the state’s fiscal basis. New investors were lured into the sugar business, attracted by the expectations to find petty commodity producers used to specialized sugarcane cultivation and by the economic opportunities of the growing regional demand. The prism of sugarification allows us to link contract farming to the imperative of extracting as much as possible of high-demand resources (be it land, water, forests, agricultural products, cheap and disciplined labour or others) at lowest cost within shortest period. As a mode of accumulation and appropriation, it helps us understand the ways in which it encroaches upon existing resources, which have been provided by nature or by the work of previous generations, until it exhausts them and moves to more attractive locations.

In the last decade, Uganda and Tanzania have become the promoters of neoliberal agricultural policies. By promoting export-oriented agricultural policies, both countries are at the forefront of a socio-economic and political battle to transform prevalently subsistence-oriented peasants into petty-capitalist entrepreneurs. The cause of their poverty is associated with the lack of entrepreneurial skills and the distance from markets. Given this diagnosis, the proposed solution is to link them in corporate-driven global agricultural value chains, where they can learn the appropriate business skills and benefit from market opportunities. The recent Manifesto for Peace and Prosperity in Uganda and Kilimo Kwanza (Agriculture First) in Tanzania magnify the virtues of large-scale, capital-intensive agricultural production by portraying corporate agribusiness and large-scale farmers as the key actors to advance agricultural transformation. Anchored in a modernist and productivist paradigm, these narratives tend to celebrate uncritically the successes in terms of yields and quantities of sugar produced and traded on the national and international markets, yet concealing the social and ecological implications of these schemes.

Contract farming is often depicted as an alternative to large-scale land enclosures, as it leaves, on paper, farmers in control of their land. However, fieldwork undertaken in various areas where these schemes have taken areas reveals significant processes of dispossession and expulsion of less productive farmers from agro-industrial sugar complexes. Given the industrial nature of sugar production, outgrowers engaged in these schemes face enormous and rising monetary demands which tend to trap them into economies of debt. In the face of rising price–cost squeeze, the smallholders unable to repay loans are obliged to sell their (mortgaged) land to the bank. The bank will then sell it to the most affluent farmers, who benefit from the crises of the majority by accumulating land at the expense of poor farmers who get expelled from the agro-poles (Martiniello & Azambuja 2019, p. 223). Amanor (2012) refers to this as a process of dispossession from below, in which land change hands not through the violence of the state but through sanitized market coercion. In other cases, large-scale farmers and sugar tycoons rent portions of land from less productive smallholders who do not have the start-up capital to join the scheme. These market imperatives and pressures shape the agrarian social structures in the sugar agro-poles, paving the way for processes of selective incorporation which contribute to rising inequalities, enhanced social differentiation and polarization.

The adverse incorporation of smallholders into vertically structured, and increasingly financialized, value chains can be red from the prism of the technological treadmill (Amanor
2019), which, by virtue of the multiplicity of technological requirements involved in these schemes, subjects farmers to growing and diversified monetary demands especially for fuel, fertilizers, credit and pesticides. Accordingly, as shown by Harriss (1987, p. 321) in the case of Indian peasants adopting green revolution technologies, those who are endowed with more resources were in a much better condition to cope with risks associated with higher cash-intensity technology. Moreover, the monopsonistic power of the company and the poor representativeness and leverage of smallholders within outgrower associations allow the company to establish the producer price at will.

Another central feature of sugarification is the appropriation and super-exploitation of labour, whether formal or informal, migrant or local, wage or family labour, through its devaluation. Labour at the factory, in the fields and surrounding compounds is organized by the sugar companies through multiple arrangements (permanent, seasonal, casual) and around a gendered division of labour. It combines more specialized, stable (and remunerative) wage labour in the factory with unskilled casual migrant labour for the seasonal work of cane cutting. Sugarcane cutting, the hardest among the labour tasks in the sugarcane complex, is performed by young migrant workers whose work gets remunerated on a piece-work basis.

Devaluing labour is the precondition to extract and appropriate value. Yet, it is not only through super-exploitation of wage labour alone that cheapening occurs and capital reproduces, it is also and perhaps most importantly through the non-monetary, care, domestic and family women labour (Patel & Moore 2017; Razavi 2009). By performing a whole set of unpaid labour tasks such as weeding and maintenance on sugarcane fields in addition to daily activities of food production, water provision and the care of children and elders, unremunerated women labour represents a fundamental element in the social reproduction of outgrower schemes.

The production and reproduction of cheap nature is a major component of the sugarcane frontier’s uneven geographical expansion. As suggested by Moore, the accumulation of capital and the production of nature work as an organic whole; capital does not produce externalities on the environment, it works through it (2015). In this sense, the accumulation of capital via sugarcane cultivation is grounded instead upon the co-production of capital, power and nature. In several regions where these schemes have taken place, a number of serious environmental concerns have been raised. The most obvious is related to deforestation as in order to make space for the increasing demand of land, forests have been cut, further contributing to the change in rainfall patterns with grave consequences for smallholders who rely on rainfall for farming. Deforestation in this context is not only caused by the expansion of company estates, but it is also driven by the attempt of large and medium-scale farmers to carve out space for sugarcane plantations, thus contributing to the devastation of the environment.

Yet capital does not simply devastate nature, it also harnesses its forces to its own advantages and uses (Moore 2015). This is striking in the case of water usage, as sugarcane requires significant amounts of water for irrigation and in the process to extract sucrose from sugarcane. In the case of Kakira Sugar Works in Busoga, the company has the right to access 459,000 cubic metres of water per month at no cost. There is wider evidence of excessive concentration of nitrogen and phosphorous in the waters of Victoria Lake and the Nile ensuing from the use and unloading of agro-chemicals (Munabi, Kansiime, & Amel 2009). In the case of Kilombero, there have been serious concerns among the residents about the lowering of the level of the Ruaha river, which provides water to almost a million smallholders in Tanzania, thus jeopardizing agrarian livelihoods beyond sugarcane cultivation itself. In the
former, inhabitants of the area have often protested against what they believe is an incremental process of declining water levels of the river (Mwakalila 2011). In both cases, the landscape was dramatically transformed through sugarcane mono-cropping at the expenses of forests and pre-existing livelihood activities. In this sense, the expansion of the sugarcane frontier (re-)produces an artificialized nature, which suits the conditions necessary for value extraction and capital accumulation.

Another key drawback of contract farming schemes is the growth of food insecurity among rural households. As a result of changing landscapes, environments and eco-systems, a worrying state of food insecurity is gradually emerging in the agro-industrial areas as farmers are tempted to maximize land devoted to sugarcane cultivation at the expense of food crops. In the Kilombero valley, this has pushed smallholders to travel long distances in order to produce the needed food, as gardens alone are insufficient to satisfy the consumption needs of rural households. In Busoga, a region previously known as the food basket of the country where surplus maize production was used to tackle food emergencies in Somalia and Sudan, has been turned into a sugar belt. Such food crisis has been turned into an opportunity for the few large-scale producers who can exploit the market demand for food crops reinvesting the revenues of sugarcane cultivation in rice, maize and other food crops production far away from the sugar agro-industrial complex. Diminishing food production has produced severe implications for households’ nutritional security. The sugarcane districts around Jinja in particular but Busoga more generally have become notorious for the highest rates of malnutrition in the country (Waluube 2013). Worsening nutritional intake has been registered, especially for women and children of rural households. In other cases, members of rural households are obliged to commute to distant lands, where the land prices and rents are lower than the highly attractive sugar belts, for their household’s food production.

Resistance and Contentious Politics

This social, economic and political diversity accompanying the expansion of sugarcane out-grower schemes is being charted in detailed studies throughout Africa. Indeed, research, including my own, is revealing the ways that sugarcane contract farming provokes a set of linked, multi-scalar transformations through a range of sometimes unexpected routes, re-arranging individuals and alliances, driving historically contingent and unpredictable micro- and macro-level reorganizations of power, authority, wealth, and status. This multiplicity, and often unpredictability, is a result of the way that sugarcane contract farming draws together into its orbit so many aspects of social, political and ecological life, incorporating labour, paid and unpaid, formal and informal, subsistence and waged. It insinuates itself into public and private authority, formal and informal, statutory and customary, in particular over land but also over the mobilization of resources, labour and power, leading to the emergence of complex and multilayered arrangements of coercion and consent. Sugarcane contract farming is integrated into and drives further complex economies of debt and accumulation, and it has dramatic impacts upon environments and ecologies, which can rebound into economic or social realms. It ties the most intimate aspects of life, human and non-human, into national and global socio-technical structures, introducing sometimes radical, sometimes subtle, transformations throughout the social, political and economic realms.

As sugarcane frontiers expand on the continent, those establishing these schemes face a series of questions as to how to bring in the components of the production system – land, labour and natural resources, particularly irrigation water – as cheaply as possible (Patel &
Moore 2017). Yet, for this to occur, substantial political articulation is needed by the state, agribusiness companies, donors and development agencies to minimize socio-ecological conflicts and align economic interests behind commonly shared narratives and visions of progress and development. This answers that different schemes arrive at vary as they respond to different social and ecological contexts and also reflect the specific decisions made and strategies employed by different actors, whether states, investors, farmers or workers. But these strategies are also dynamic and evolving, as actors learn from the successes or failures of other contract farming schemes and adjust their implementation strategy – or mode of resistance – accordingly. It is in this matrix of shifting strategies, modes of organization, deployments of force and conflicting narratives that we must also look for the politics of sugarcane contract farming.

Yet, these processes of value creation, which necessitate bringing together simultaneously land, labour and nature, cannot be read as purely economic. They are simultaneously eminently political and ecological processes (Peluso & Watts 2001), which signal the contentious nature of, and resistance to, changes in land-based social relations (Borras & Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015). Uncovering their political and ecological articulation allows delineating the links between the mutually constitutive nature of political, economic, ecological and social processes. This makes clear the importance of placing land questions of control, tenure and access (see Mafeje 2003), and dispossession (see Moyo 2003), environmental transformation (see Patel & Moore 2017) and social conflict (see Martiniello 2019) at the centre of the analysis of the re-organization of farming relations under contract farming. In this way, space is made beyond economistic interpretations of the phenomenon for the analysis of contract farming as a set of power assemblages that spatially, ecologically and socially restructures land and agrarian relations.

This shift to more intensive forms of involving farmers in sugarcane production must also be made sense of as part an effort to avoid the high cost or unsustainability of the alternative, that is, commercial plantation agriculture. Contract farming represents an effort to avoid depending on the excessive force needed to dispossess people of their land, with the intense resistance it provokes; to avoid having to secure or create a disciplined wage work force; and to escape the financial risks of poor harvests or falling prices, as well as the ecological impacts of irrigation and land overuse. It is this ‘participatory’ nature of contract farming that makes it attractive to capitalist investors and development agencies alike; in the name of empowerment and agency, contract farming promises to make farmers willing partners in bringing their labour and land into the production process, in taking on the burden of extracting a subsidy from nature and the ecological costs of that extraction, and in sharing the risk faced by producers in globalized commodity chains.

It is therefore relevant to re-politicize the debate around contract farming by looking at the often-silenced power relations within which these schemes are embedded. I argue that what is seen in Uganda’s and Tanzania’s expansion is a political dynamic derived both from the major dislocations and dispossession required to establish the plantation estate and its work force, as well as from the effort to bring many smallholders using unimproved methods on land with sometimes unclear tenure arrangements into contracted arrangements for supplying sugarcane. The result has been highly contentious politics around sugar’s expansion, where struggles over land dispossession merge with those around exploitative wage labour, around the loss and transformation of livelihoods, and around debt, power inequalities and environmental harm, a matrix in which state violence and co-optation are ever-present.
By using a comparative lens, I have sought to explore a set of commonalities and differences across the case studies. Within the broad framework of political contestation and fragmentation, I would call attention to a series of issues that arise in all case studies.

1 Land contention can take on various forms in contract farming. Establishing nucleus estates plus outgrower schemes requires the acquisition of land by assemblages of state and capital often through forceful means or through ‘consensual’ negotiations, which can involve new alliances and sometimes the co-optation of customary land authorities. The result is a contentious politics around land dispossession and contestation, which can manifest in a sequence of land-related conflicts between the state and companies, on the one hand, and existing land users and food producers, on the other, as well as within communities themselves.

2 Building upon this matrix of violence and dispossession, and despite differences across cases due to the diverse temporalities of gestation of contract farming schemes, the dynamics of value creation, appropriation and circulation generated by each scheme have been an important force behind patterns of social differentiation, selective incorporation and widening inequalities.

3 Confirming what has been argued extensively by other critical studies (Gyapong 2020), our cases show that these schemes do not become vehicles of job creation or rural labour absorption. This is often because specialized labour within the plants and on the plantations is undertaken by skilled personnel brought in from outside, while the hard work of cane cutting and planting is often performed by migrant workers often recruited from geographically remote and marginal areas. Labour relations are therefore socially re-organized around the functioning of the plantation and refining plant, extracting labour especially from family members in the form of non-monetary, non-remunerated labour. Because this labour is fundamental to the reproduction of contract farmers, it becomes a cost which capital externalize onto farmers.

4 Alongside the new labour discipline, the spread of sugarcane contract farming schemes have contributed to changes in land use, moving away from cultivation of food crops and forestry products for local and national markets and towards cash crops for national, regional and international markets. This has contributed to food insecurity and changes in the modes of livelihood.

5 Ecological transformations imposed by these schemes, especially in terms of deforestation, soil deterioration, landscape homogenization, biodiversity reduction and water appropriation, can jeopardize the livelihoods of those who depend on access to natural resources for their social reproduction. Sugarcane contract farming thus also poses further questions about the simultaneous role of nature as reservoir of resources and as a sink of capitalist agro-industry, playing a crucial role in the overall reproduction of the scheme.

Conclusion

The chapter explored the relationships between land enclosures, contract farming and the proliferation of sugarcane cultivation in Africa. Drawing from political economy, political ecology and political sociology, and revisiting and building upon Little and Watts’s analysis of contract farming in Africa, the chapter has argued that it represents a cheapening mechanism that allows production of agricultural commodities to be undertaken at cheaper costs, externalizing the risks to outgrowers and expanding the geographical reach of agro-industrial
value frontiers. Rather than seeing contract farming as the antithesis to land enclosures, I interpreted it as an instrument that facilitates the incorporation of land, labour and nature within the capitalist metabolism. In doing so, I offered a preliminary analysis of the social and environmental implications of contract farming seen as a transmission belt of the agro-extractive logic of industrial capitalist agriculture. The chapter thus explored the significance of the contentious politics underpinning contract farming, giving centrality to the neglected questions of land and agrarian struggles in shaping contract farming dynamics and outcomes.

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