China and the African soil: the *land grab* issue

1) The two main actors

Africa and China are two giants in the international system: Africa is a continent of about 30 million square kilometers in which over 1.1 billion people live in 54 different States and its population is of about 36 people per square kilometer. On the other side, the other giant is represented by China, a single State covering a 9.6 million square kilometers surface giving home to about 1.36 billion people. Its population density is of 145 people per square kilometer.

A first difference is on the economy side and its development: Africa, with its 54 countries and all its differences, can be considered a developing continent while China, thanks to its reforms introduced in the late 1970s, can be considered as a country with a transition economy. By the way, for some things China is very close to modern countries while for others it is still very close to traditional ones.

2) An initial political relationship transformed into a current business one

The first direct contacts between China and the african continent can be dated back to the half of the 20th century, when on October 1st 1949 there was the birth of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Since the beginning it was politically isolated, mostly because the U.S. didn’t want to recognize the new-born State because of its fear for communism to spread in the whole area. For this reason, during the Fifties, China began to create some sort of connections with the independent African states.
The first ties between these two actors were political ones. Over time a lot has changed and the links among them moved from the political plane to the economic and business one: in October 2000 Beijing has hosted the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a meeting between Ministers for Foreign Affairs and the ones for Economy and Finance. By the way, the political role played today is extremely important and the Chinese government is working a lot on the political side: every once a year, the Chinese President, or its Prime Minister, go to Africa to meet the local Heads of State. When African leaders go to China they are welcomed by the population and all newspapers and TV programmes talk about this event. None of western politicians or countries act in this way or give so much importance to African leaders.

The 2012 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation has been held in Beijing

The strong link we have today between China and Africa has three major roots: Chinese international relations crisis after the clashes in Tienanmen Square in June 1989; its commercial expansion during the Ninties; the will to have the support of a large number of countries in the United Nations.

During the Eighties and Ninties China found out a new great interest in Africa, mostly because of the growing need for raw materials that have to feed its huge economic expansion. This leads us right to the heart of an issue that has gained more and more importance in the last years: land grabbing.

3) Introducing land grabbing and its meaning

The land grabbing issue is defined as privates (multinationals, companies or other investors) or States buying large portions of land (hundreds or even thousands of hectares of soil) in a foreign and not developed country to produce foodstuffs that are
going to be exported and used for its home needs. By doing so, natural resources are being stolen to the country that is victim of land grabbing that, as previously said, are very poor countries such as African, Asian and South american ones. These portions of soil can often be rented for a period of time that can go from 30 up to 99 years. According to Grain, an international non-profit organization, the land grabbing issue has already determined, until the end of 2009, some total sales for over 100 billion dollars. This trend has been increasing since the beginning of the 21st century and it is due to the growing global demand for food and bio-fuels.

Some of the major causes are economic crises, food emergencies and speculation on food and agricultural prices on global markets. For some countries, having control of agriculture abroad is the answer to the food crisis since investing in farmland prevents countries that don’t have enough arable land from crisis and too high prices for foodstuffs. Some governative agencies find it possible to get to some win-win situations, where both host and the foreign countries can have a positive effect from the use of land, for example, in African countries. However, very often, higher investments do not imply the creation of employment for the local population and are not even helpful to improve their living standards.

4) Land Grab today: its spread around the world and its major actors

According to a research from Land Matrix Partnership, a global and independent monitoring initiative that promotes transparency and accountability in decisions over land and investments, since 2001 up to 2012 an area of 227 million hectares of soil has been sold or rented out. It is an area wide as much as north-western Europe. The fact is that half of the whole lands are in Africa and they cover an area wide as much as Germany. The same datas are given also by Oxfam Italia, an NGO that is part of Oxfam, one of the most important confederations specialized in humanitarian assistance and development projects.

The most important selling countries are in the Southern part of the world, where we find the poorest States that sell their land because they can provide low cost of soil, workers and good weather even though they suffer serious poverty and food problems: in Ethiopia 46% of the population suffers from starvation risks but the same problem afflicts 44% of Tanzanian population and 33% of Mali’s one.

Countries with little land to use for agriculture aims such as Saudi Arabia, or the ones with a high population density such as China, have began to buy land abroad to use it for their national need of food many years ago. In fact, the most important purchasing countries are Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Gulf countries, India, China, Japan, South Korea, Libya, Syria, Germany, Great Britain and Sweden.
The first country to begin with this policy has been Saudi Arabia that has its biggest source of income in crude oil. For this reason the king began using its petrodollars to buy farmland for the production of cereals and rice.

China followed Saudi Arabia’s example and, in the case of Africa, has bought 2.8 million hectares in Congo, 2 million in Zambia, 10 thousands in Camerun, 4 thousands in Uganda and 300 in Tanzania.

Then came India with its 370 thousands hectares in Ethiopia and 232 thousands in Madagascar.

Since the Seventies the Gulf countries have considered Sudan as a bread-basket but the major buying State is China which represents about 40% of world-wide agricultural population but has only 9% of soil that can be used for agriculture. For this reason, China is interested in granting food at an affordable price for its population, but also in finding raw materials for its industries and for the bio-fuels businesses. The first formal Chinese investment in Africa dates back to 1995 in Zambia and today it has already invested over 3
million hectares in Brasil and Laos but mostly in Africa, where the cost of soil is lower than the one of other continents. Since the year 2000 China is pushing its people to go to Africa to try to solve its demographic problems.

Worldwide land grab situation until 2008, numbers and destinations of purchasing countries

Both State and companies are important actors, but above all, the private sector is the most important one regarding land grabbing: States give their political support and operate at the diplomatic level while companies lead the projects: this is China’s case with big State companies and joint ventures.

Regarding private companies, as much as it is possibile to know, the ones from South Korea own about 2,306,000 hectares abroad, followed by China with 2,090,800 hectares and Saudi Arabia with 1,610,200 hectares. The thing to notice and to keep well in mind is that, even though the Chinese private companies are so important at global level, they are very young: in 1992 the Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) affirmed that “economy is not incompatible with socialism” and this meant that from that moment on, private ownership in industrial sector was permitted. In the period 1921-2002 the CCP was the one representing “the vanguard of the working class” but in 2002 things changed when there was the famous sentence that the party “represents the vanguard of the Chinese people” and not only the “working class” anymore: people could become entrepeneuers too.

Among the private sector, the demand comes mostly from factories producing bio-fuels, needing huge portions of land in order to produce palm oil, corn, oil-seed rapes, sunflowers and sugarcane from which they produce alternative fuels to petrol products.
About two thirds of natural resources bought in these years are in Africa, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. South Korea and one of its biggest companies, Daewoo, has bought in the only island of Madagascar over 1,300,000 hectares, estimated in half of the total arable land of the country, which is using for the production of corn and palm oil. These huge portions of land can be bought at an extremely low price, going from one up to 10 dollars per hectare a year for a maximum period of 99 years. The farthest are the pieces of land from ports, infrastructures and roads, and lower the price.

This lead many States, including the Gulf ones, several East Asian Countries and Western multinational companies to re-evaluate their strategies and secure land and water elsewhere, essentially turning to “offshore” food production to supply their growing populations.
This is what is going on in Africa, the continent that most of all suffers from food problems and starvation but is forced to import food at higher costs. The continent in which land for agricultural purposes is being sold to foreign and richer countries.

5) A new form of colonization and its causes

One of the main causes of the land grab issue is the increase in foodstuffs price in the 2007-2008 period. Prices have been rising since 2003 and this was a major cause of alarm for both food and energy safety that are the key points for the biggest import countries, such as United State, China and some European countries. These three giant actors are increasing their demand of raw materials for the production of bio-fuels due to the new energy policies. The Asian countries alone are responsible for the land grabbing of over 12 million hectares of African soil. Another cause for the growing price of food is the higher cost of fuel. Energy and food safety are the reasons that made governments move in this direction, while the private financial actors started buying land in order to diversify their investment portfolio.

The second most important cause of land grabbing is the growing interest in bio-fuels: in 2006 the amount of soil used for this purpose was 14 million hectares, by 2030 the forecasts talk of 35-40 million hectares. This fact summed up the increasing oil price, led to investments in the purchase of both land and water resources.

Another very important reason for land grabbing is the rapid increase of the population, which can give some problems if we think about food safety, because a bigger population consumes more that what it is able to produce. Lands are used more and more to produce bio-fuels, as well as food.
As previously said, there is the possibility to own huge portions of land for a period of time up to 99 years. Having the control of such amounts of foreign lands for almost a century, is something very similar to what we have already seen during the colonial period. The land grab issue is not something we have never seen before: its origins date back in the past centuries, when slaves were being used in the American plantations. Colonization has been the most important pillar of land grabbing in Africa, where the conquered lands had to supply the cities with the raw materials needed. Still today, the colonial era in Sub-Saharan Africa is not over yet: it is present but has assumed new shapes and has new actors. What has not changed is the exploitation of raw materials from the African land by foreign countries.

According to many international observers, another symbol of Chinese colonization in Africa can be seen in the huge cities that are being built in Africa by its companies. One of the most important examples is Nova Cidade de Kilamba, a potentially 500 thousand-people-living town, built by the China International Trust and Investment Corporation that sees over 90% of unsold flats because of the too high prices of a single apartment, about 90 thousand euros. For this reason, it is considered as a ghost town. Kilamba is a town in Angola where this Chinese company has built 750 block of flats going from eight up to eleven-storey buildings, but many other “China Towns” like this one are being built in the whole continent, as in Chad, Nigeria, Zambia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Because of the high prices of each flat, many people see these buildings not as the homes for the local population but as potential homes for future Chinese citizens moving to Africa. According to the “One China in Africa” policy, approved by Beijing, it would be possible to solve China’s overpopulation problem by moving about 300 million Chinese people to Africa. If this were the real aim of the Chinese government, then it would be another way to colonize Africa.

The current land grab we are now witnessing is a new and aggressive land grab driven by geopolitical factors arising from the 2008 food crisis and hedge fund bets on rising land prices. In most African countries the management of land is a problem and creates a high number of clashes. In African societies, land has always been considered the most important
resource. In Senegal, before the 2007-2008 economic crisis, only private companies were investing in foreign lands but after that period, many countries got interested in this activity.

In 2008, in the context of the global food price crisis and serious food price inflation in China, a confidential document was drawn up by China’s Ministry of Agriculture. The document argued that the country would in the future no longer be able to maintain its own food security, and that active efforts should be made to secure land concessions overseas.

Also protected areas have been sold or rented to foreign investors (the ones classified as forests have decreased by 42.7%; from 11 million hectares in the Sixties they were just 6.3 million hectares in 2010). According IPAR, the Agricultural and Rural Prospective Initiative, a sub-regional NGO which aims to provide strategic analysis of rural and agricultural issues, and its 2011 report on Senegal, in that year over 409 thousand hectares of land have been sold or leased, almost one third of the country’s total available land.

In 2011, the sudafarian Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Tina Joemat-Pettersson, has harshly accused foreign courtries purchasing arable lands in Africa to secure their own food safety for they are guilty of causing a new form of colonization. She has mentioned the case of Sudan, where about 40% of the land has been sold to foreigners, which bring with them their own labour and workers, and materials to till the land, they use the soil of the country and then leave. China in particular has been accusedof playing the strategy game of Risk with Africa’s future.

The larger and larger amount of hectares of soil used to obtain bio-fuels products for energy purposes and the lower amount of land used to produce food, is one of the reasons that explain why the 2008 global food crisis made the cost of wheat increase by 77% and the cost of rice by 18% (but in some cases also of 150%) and, as a consequence, the increasing price in all other foodstuffs.
6) The reasons behind China’s great interest in Africa

The most important presence in Sub-Saharan Africa is the Chinese one, in fact, its first infrastructure dates back to 1975: it’s the 1,860 kilometer long railway called Freedom Railway connecting the two east-african countries of Zambia and Tanzania.

In the following years, the ties between the two actors got closer and closer: in 2003 Chinese investments in Sub-Saharan Africa counted for 68 million dollars, that soon became 6.48 billions in 2008, about 33% of the total amount of investments. China has a very strong presence in this part of the continent because of the huge amount of raw materials needed by Chinese economy, but also because this part of the world is an enormous market composed by millions of potential consumers and thousands of infrastructures to build. On the other side, China offers all that is needed, from technology to clothes, passing by infrastructures: scooters, bikes, radios and many cheap products that have a low level of technology but that allow African people to reach a basic level of consumption.

We must also say that Africa’s exports to China have been growing from less than 1 billion dollars in 1990 to almost 15 billions in 2004. Before 2010, China became Africa’s most important trading partner and it is important to highlight the fact that both actors gain benefits from this relationship because, in the balance of payments, the exports are almost the same of the imports.

While all countries of the world want to be payed with cash for the materials and the help they offer, China accepts to be payed also with natural resources, such as raw materials like crude oil, copper, iron and wood.

China has the world’s biggest population, about 1.36 billion people, in the period 2000-2006 its GDP growing rate has been among the highest in the world, about 9.6%, but the country does not have enough arable land for its enormous population. This country alone counts for 20% of the world population, yet it owns only 8% of global farmland. For this reason, one of the most urgent needs is to secure itself arable land and reduce as much as it can its dependency from the import of food.

With Deng Xiaoping, during the 1978-1984 period began the reform for the agriculture sector, the aim of which was to increase China’s limited productivity. The first step of this important revolution had to come from agriculture that played a key-role in the country’s economy, and, in particular, it has been the one of separating the price: part of the production could be kept for the ones that could sell their products on the market. People working in the agriculture sector could keep some money, and this was meant to push to a new form of domestic demand. In the following five-year plan, the urban industrial sector was involved and the important thing was that from that moment on, firms were allowed to keep the profit. Until 1997 all economy sectors were involved.

Many people still question whether China is still a developing country or not. More probably, it has a transition economy because the weight of agricultural sector in China’s GDP passed from 28.1% in 1978 to 12.5% in 2005, while the service sector has grown from 23.7% up to 40% in the same period.

China has a high number of state-owned companies and of private ones but it is not always easy to draw a distinction of the two. Anyway, since 1998 many private enterprises rose,
from less that 10% of total industrial enterprises to almost 50% in 2005. Talking about SOE’s, there are two different types: some are controlled by the central government; others are controlled by local governments and towns. State controlled companies are the biggest and most important ones: this is because the State will keep being the owner of some crucial sectors companies, such as the ones of oil and electricity. The country’s 9 biggest companies produce 69% of total profits and they are involved in the sectors of oil, communication, steel, coal and energy.

However, Chinese companies and its State have already purchased lands for 3 million hectares, an area wide as the Italian regions of Lazio and Abruzzo combined together. For the 10th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (2001-2005), China has began using the *Going Global* strategy and the agricultural sector playes a major role to avoid clashes and riots in its society.

In 2001 China has entered the World Trade Organazation (WTO) and thanks to this its exports began taking off: in 1970 it counted for 1% of global export, in 2010 was counting for 10%, becoming world biggest exporting country.

To be more precise, China has had an explicit “*Going Out*” policy since 2001 as part of a business development (rather than food security) strategy. The central government has encouraged its firms to invest abroad, partly to secure access to resources where Chinese demand outstrips domestic supply, and also to build robust international companies capable of competing in key sectors with leading established multinationals. This policy has been supported by a range of incentives such as tax breaks, credit, low-interest loans and customs preferences, allied to high-level diplomatic support. The focus of this activity has been strategic SOEs, which Chinese policy-makers see as capable of rivalling established multinationals. However, in theory smaller companies investing in land may also be able to access government support. The China-Africa Development Fund set up by China Development Bank to finance China’s development programme in Africa is actively looking for opportunities to support Chinese agrobusiness development on the continent.

China’s population suffers from a severe shortage of suitable farmland because 2/3 of China’s territory is arid grassland and desert, with climate change worsening the situation. As a result, it is no surprise that Beijing is calling for Chinese firms to engage in land grabs
for arable farmland in foreign countries, starting in 2011, with the minister of agriculture saying “the time is ripe for the country’s agricultural companies to embark on a ‘go outward strategy.’” In Africa, such land grabs are even more possible today since two million Chinese live in the continent. Africa accounts for about 60 percent of the world’s arable land, and most of its countries do not achieve 25 percent of their potential yield. No wonder, therefore, that there has been an increased interest on large-scale investment in agriculture in Africa, especially by China.

Purchases come mostly by Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), that are different compared to other types of investments because they clearly show the will to have long term direct control over the land. It is the control to make the difference between FDI’s and other kinds of investments. China made a big use of FDI’s that jumped from 4 billion dollars in 1990 and reached the impressive amount of 230 billions in 2009. Land is an important target for Foreign Direct Investments.

A common external perception is that China is supporting its enterprises to acquire land abroad as part of a national food security strategy. China’s goal is to address the challenge of food security, and ‘provide additional food resources, through sovereign and private funds’ on the African continent. The domestic demand for agricultural commodities has been rising 23 percent/year since the turn of the millennium. Meat consumption is up from 15kg/year/per capita in 1980 to 70kg/year/per capita in 2010. Another major factor explaining this explosion in the demand for agricultural resources is China’s fast growing industrial sector.

Data provided by the previously mentioned Land Matrix, the most comprehensive open access database currently available on land acquisition activities worldwide, seemed at first to confirm this trend. When Land Matrix was launched in April 2012, China was designated as one of the major investors buying farmland in Africa. By the way, revised information introduced in the database up until April 2013, suggests that land acquisitions
in Africa are mainly being operated by European countries rather than Asiatic ones and China itself is at the 19th place.
Some economy actors, like Chinese companies, are trying to create a vertically integrated market, from the production up to the distribution chain, so as to avoid the purchase stage and all its risks, as the increasing price of food.
Anyway, China’s success is due to the so-called Beijing consensus. This policy wants to show China’s economic development model as an alternative model, especially for developing countries, to the Washington Consensus of market-friendly policies promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that imposes countries to stabilize their economy. Unlike western countries, China gives its help without forcing the leaders of the states asking for its help to change the way of ruling their country, and this is because the Chinese government doesn’t care whether its dealing with corrupt african leaders (actually many african states have this problem) or if these leaders are charged for violations against human rights (as in the case of South Sudan), it will help “without making questions”. This is also the reason that helps explaining why african leaders accept China’s help instead of the one offered by international institutions, that are willing to give their help only if african leaders accept to follow some economy and democracy principles. China’s strategy is often the best one also because grants money loans at lower interest rates compared to the ones offered by international agencies like the previously mentioned World Bank and IMF.

7) Some concrete examples of Chinese companies operating in Africa

As previously said, the ties between Beijing and the african countries became stronger and stronger over time and the deals made aren’t just about economy. In the year 2000, the Chinese capital city has held the first FOCAC summit, an cooperation programme taking place every three years and alternating Beijing to an african town: the first african city where the FOCAC summit took place has been Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital city in 2003, while the last summit took place in Johannesburg, South Africa in december 2015. The cooperation is about all sectors possible: economy, infrastructure (some of them are roads, buildings, hospitals, and harbours), technology, energy, education and culture (including language programs).
However, China sees Africa as the new agricultural investment land for food and bio-fuels and of course, the purchase of land plays a key role:
-- Nigeria produces 120 thousand tonnes of cassava each year, of which 5 thousands are exported to China, for an african yearly income of 38 million dollars;
-- in Camerun there is the project to create a 5 thousands hectares plantation for the production of cassava and rice. The investment money will come from the China Export-Import (Exim) Bank and the FOCAC funds;
-- in Mali 60 hectares of farmland are going to be used for the production of cereals and a joint venture is going to work for the production of over 100 thousand tonnes of sugar per year.
A first study case is the one of Dantong Trading Enterprise (DTE), founded by Ouyang Riping, a private Chinese investor operating in western Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast) since 1980. In Senegal he was aimed at the sesame cultivation. China consumes 700 thousand tonnes of sesame per year, but its domestic production is only of 300 thousand tonnes. Taking the opportunity of the China’s Afican Policy, this company has the target of 150 thousand tonnes per year, by cultivating a 60 thousand hectares surface in 5 years time. The seeds and the working equipment are provided by the DTE itself, and the whole production is going to be exported to China. Thanks to the agricultural investments promotion policy, led by the Going Global Strategy, the needed credit comes from the policy banks. Sesame is in the list of the 450 duty-free products, and can be exported without any additional taxes.

How did a Chinese investor succeed in obtaining such a wide portion of land? Since Senegal has big food safety problems and is dependent on imports, why has the government leased its farmlands to a foreign company that is going to produce foodstuffs that are going to be exported? How has a Chinese company been able to profit from a programme that has the aim to fight hunger in Senegal and use this profits for China’s own food safety issues? For the very low level of transparency there are no sufficient informations about the deals among the DTE and the local government.

By the use of land grabbing it is possible to practice the mining exploitation too, much used by China that controls the copper market (90 billion dollars), the ones of aluminium (69 billion dollars), zinc (20 billion dollars), nickel (22 billion dollars) and the one of petroleum.

But the land grab issue causes big damages and many of these are also on the environmental side: in Gabon the north-western part of the country has been defined as a protected area but chinese firms managed, by using cash, in obtaining the authorization to exploit the iron minings for the next 25 years. To reach the area they had to cut down thousands of trees in order to build a road that crosses the Natural National Park. The exploiting activity is done without care about the enviormental damages to the local area. The exploitation of raw materials comes before anything else.

Ethiopia can be considered as another big and relevant study case. Addis Ababa’s government launched in 2010 a huge programme to transform the country into a middle-income country by 2025. This is the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), which includes many economy reform plans with the aim of strenghtening the industrial, service and infrastructural sectors, give an incentive to exports and modernize the agricultural system. The GTP is a five-year plan that includes many mega-infrastructures projects: a Special Economic Zone for Chinese firms investing in the leather sector, the Light Way Transit (LWT) that is a light railway crossing the city, and the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). All three projects see Chinese companies and firms involved. This last project has been criticized because of the consequences that is going to have on the populations that will be forced to move in order to create this enormus dam, which is the biggest and most expensive projects ever created by Ethiopia’s government. Costs are extremely high: the only hydraulic turbins cost 1.7 billion dollars and are going to be produced in China but the total investment cost is of 4.8 billion dollars, as much as 10% of Ethiopia’s 2012 GDP. Ethiopia needs China’s help, since the World Bank and other
international investors were not willing to spend such a big amount of money for this project. The GERD has been projected and financed by Beijing and once completed, in July 2017, Ethiopia is going to be the regional hub for the production and export of energy since GERD by itself will be able to produce 5,250 MW of electric energy. By now, Ethiopia’s most efficient dam is the Gibel III dam that can produce 1,870 MW of electric energy. Actually, almost all Ethiopian dams have been projected and financed by Chinese investors and entrepreneurs, like the Tekeze and the Amerti-Neshe ones. By providing its help, China has also secured itself a big amount of electric energy supply and has all the best conditions to buy the farmlands in these soil-rich areas. Nevertheless, in many areas some other Chinese firms have already bought the rich farmland and have begun the production of sugarcane in a 6 thousand hectares area, nothing compared to the 600 thousand hectares leased by the Ethiopian government in the 2004-2009 period. In 2012 WenJiaBao, who has been the PRC’s Premier from 2003 until 2013, said that chinese development is “unbalanced, unsustainable and uncoordinated”, and what he wanted to say was that it is not just important to produce more but also to produce better and for this reason China is also moving to green power. Even though Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world, and one that heavily suffers from food shortages, its government keeps renting out its lands to foreign investors, especially Chinese ones, hoping for a technology and know how transfer and for its population to be employed in these projects. However, this does not happen, because often Chinese companies don’t use local workers since they use a very high number of machineries in the farmlands. This does not bring employment for the locals nor a technology know how transfer. More often, Indian and Chinese companies use workers coming from their homeland. Ethiopia’s unemployment rate is of 16.80% and this, summed up the fact that thousands of people are forced to leave their land for the new projects and “land-owners”, can bring to local clashes. About 80% of the Ethiopian population is employment in the agricultural sector, which represents about 50% of the entire GDP. This African country does not have oil, raw materials or precious metals and stones. Since Ethiopia does not have any oil, its “black gold” are its land and water sources.

8) Corruption, local populations and what to do for the future

Due to the lack of transparency, it is not possible to consult the documents and this raises the risks of corruption: according to Oxfam, 15% of people that had to deal for the transfer of land took kickbacks. Many countries that have been victims of colonization, combine written laws with the unwritten ones and with the traditional ones. There are no formal rules concerning the use of land. The final result is that we find very big gaps in the law system and many actors (both local and foreign) take advantage from this situation. In most cases, central African governments leave lots of freedom to act to the new landowners and they are not seriously interested to check whether the environment is not being polluted by these foreign actors. Foreign companies and governments are not the only actors interested in the purchase of huge portions of African land: also African leaders are very interested in renting out (we
might also talk about selling) their land since this is an easy and quick way to earn money without having the risk of making investments that might take some time before showing their result and bring some cash to the State.

When central governments sell a portion of land, they force the local population to abandon that area and their homes, without giving them enough money to live somewhere else. Often these people are forced to move to the suburbs of the towns where there is lack of infrastructures: the problems are not only on the economic side but also on the cultural and social one.

Even though the inhabitants are the most involved in the *land grabbing* issue, no government ever really takes their opinion into consideration. Local peasants are the most affected, like in the case of Uganda, where 20 thousand families lost their land and homes that have been expropriated by the British *New Forest Company*, involved in the timber sector.

Another big problem caused by *land grabbing* is the type of products that are going to be produced. Since hundred of thousands of hectares of land are used each year by foreigners to export the products of the land in their home countries, in this way the cost of food products rises, causing worse living conditions in the local populations.

Today the purchase of land has no real control: there are no organizations or institutions with the task to check whether the land deals are made with respect for the local populations and international laws. Moreover, for this reason, the *land grab* issue does not only make worse living conditions for the local populations, but has also no positive results for the local development and can provoke human right violations.

*Rights and Resources Initiative*, an international NGOs coalition, published in February 2012 a research according to which in the 35 African countries analyzed, most of the 1.4 billion hectares of country land could be used by the central governments as they wished, taking advantage of the gaps in the property rights system. Today this huge amount of land makes it possible for over 428 million of poor peasants to survive.

The biggest risk is that African governments might begin a downward trend for the purchase of land in order to attract more and more investors. The local markets are highly damaged because big foreign multinationals are able to produce a much bigger amount of food products, like fruits for example, and for this reason they can sell their products at a lower price compared to the one of local peasants.

If a country does not have the possibility of controlling its own land, it is running a very high risk: the one of losing its own independence because in the present-day era, economy is the most important pillar of the global system. The increasing *land grab* issue must be carefully studied because it represents a very high risk for small farmers: today they produce food for 70% of world population and contribute to the survival of 60-80% of the population in some developing countries. Today’s decisions will have a great effect on world’s future population that is going to be bigger than the actual one. The continuous deforestation and exploitation of soil due to intensive farming will be just some of the consequences we are going to be called to face.
Africa & Globalization: Learning from the Past, Enabling a Better Future, United Nations University


Cirillo Davide, Yade Awa, Le Formiche Verdi sognano ancora in Africa? Land grab in Senegal: casi studio tra sovranità alimentare e diritti sulla terra.


Cina conquista l'Africa, cresce il fenomeno del landgrabbing: www.solosapere.it/esteri/1719.


Is China a better partner for Africa than Europe and the West?: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPXSoOZikzs.


Land grabbing: opportunità o rischi per lo sviluppo dell'agricoltura?: http://www.agriregionieuropa.univpm.it/content/article/31/22/land-grabbing-opportunita-o-rischi-lo-sviluppo-dellagricoltura.


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