Foreword

“Land grabs” have been grabbing headlines since 2008. There have been thousands of media reports on large-scale land deals, particularly for agriculture in developing countries.

Large-scale international land acquisitions are nothing new: they date back at least to the Roman Empire, and have been a marked feature of colonial expansion. But the number and scale of the deals that were proposed or executed in the wake of the 2007-2008 global food price increases have given them renewed prominence. As of the time that this book went to press, the Land Matrix reported information on over 950 land deals in various stages, collectively covering millions of hectares.

That many of the land acquisitions target countries with poor land governance and food insecurity has prompted Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, to express concerns. Reports by major international organizations such as the World Bank and International Land Coalition have laid out the broad parameters of these land transactions, and there is a growing body of scholarly work by international researchers on particular transactions.

What has been less prominent has been a strong voice and picture from within the countries themselves and evidence on how large-scale land acquisitions arise and play out on the ground. This volume seeks to address these gaps.

The discourse used has heightened attention to the debates about this phenomenon: critics refer to “land grabs” and “neocolonialism,” while proponents speak of “agricultural investment.” The chapters in this book present a range of perspectives and illustrate how interpretations are often embedded in the discourse.

This volume also shows the diversity of drivers, arrangements, and impacts. Although the focus of the volume (and international debates) is on international land acquisitions, some authors give attention to domestic land transfers. The sections on country, community, and household characteristics identify factors that affect the outcomes of these land deals in a range of dimensions, including productivity, livelihoods, services, and natural resources. Moreover, the impacts are not homogeneous, even within the local area. The attention to gender implications of land deals is especially noteworthy.

Amid the burgeoning literature on (domestic and) international land acquisitions, the developing country perspectives represented in this volume are very welcome. The range of approaches and findings help to move us beyond the popular debates to a more nuanced understanding of the range of factors that give rise to land deals and shape their outcomes.

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