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**Can 'Land Rush' lead to Skills Transfer?**  
**Rethinking Capacity Building in African Agriculture**

*Justitia O Nnabuko & Chibuike U Uche*  
*University of Nigeria*

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## Abstract

In recent times, there have been increasing interests in African land and agriculture by foreign farmers from all over the world.<sup>1</sup> All across the continent, governments are now selling what are arguably the only factor of production that is under their control and the very basis of their nationhood: land under various guises.<sup>2</sup> So intense is this movement that an international conference was recently organized in Groningen Netherlands to address this issue. The dynamics and complexities of the African land sales were perhaps aptly summarized in the public announcement for the above conference which stated thus:

Sometimes referred to as “neo-colonialism” due to their resemblance to colonial land exploits, these acquisitions have been largely driven by a global “scramble” for food security and access to natural resources. Foreign actors gain access to land in part by employing discursive tools and media to portray African farmland as “unused” or “unproductive” while the local farmers are portrayed as “backwards”, underdeveloped, environmentally destructive, and desperately poor. Access is also secured through the market capitalist economy and often legitimized as “economic growth” or “sustainable development”. Indeed, proponents argue that land deals bring new technologies, improved agricultural practices, poverty alleviation, and modernization to developing countries. However, the presence of foreign stakeholders in local territories also involves an encounter of often contradictory cultural paradigms, leading to pervasive social, economic and cultural changes and/or conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

Irrespective of the numerous debates around the subject matter, one thing that is certain is that most African countries lack the requisite agricultural skills to optimally use their lands. It is such skills gap that has created immense opportunities for the current international exploitation of African lands. The essence of the proposed paper is to critique

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<sup>1</sup> It has also been noted thus: “Over the past few years, investors from high- and medium-income countries, including state agencies, have started to lease large areas of land in lower-income countries for commercial agricultural production. The pattern is likely to continue due to increasing demand for food in emerging super-economies such as India and China, rising oil prices and scarcity of water and land. Both the numbers of land deals and the size of landholdings being leased or purchased have significantly increased over the past five years. According to the World Bank, the rights to some 50 million hectares in Africa alone have either been acquired since 2006 or are under negotiation, while NGOs like GRAIN estimate that a far greater area is affected. Countries selling or leasing farmland to investors are primarily low-income countries in Africa, and to a lesser extent Asia and Latin America. In Africa, countries selling or leasing very large areas of land include Sudan, Mozambique, Mali, and Ethiopia, and many other countries have seen smaller deals. The Agricultural Investment Agency in Ethiopia is reportedly considering offering foreign firms three million hectares of land over the next two years” (Huggins, 2010). See also Silver-Greenberg (2009).

<sup>2</sup> “Land is at the heart of social, political and economic life in most African economies, which continue to rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources for a significant share of GDP, national food needs, employment [and] export revenue” (Toulmin, 2008, p.10).

<sup>3</sup> See Call for Papers (2010)

these exploitations with the view of suggesting ways that would help ensure that foreign investors in African agriculture also become effective vehicles for enhancing the skills gap of Africans in this important sector.

### **Selected References**

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