

Political Economy of Forestland Grabbing in the Congo Basin: A Literature Review and Neglected Issues in Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo

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Abstract

This article's objective is to examine how forestland grabbing has been handled as an issue by both scientists and organizations in the Congo Basin's context. Forestland grabbing here refers to an act of occupation of large scales of land (scale of capital) in forestry areas by actors with substantial financial or material resources, in a situation of unbalanced cognitive, political, or economic resources among involved actors, with the aim of accumulation, in a scope of action whereby the vulnerable populations are dispossessed of their customary lands, being their principal resource for survival and the network of foreign or local land controllers, who may be multinationals, international or local elites, is widened, with the consequence of the intensification of the social and political economic gap between the capitalistic elites and the communities. It is therefore a discussion based on a comparative review of Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo. From a desk research method, it appears that the Congo Basin has been neglected in the scientific discussion on forestland grabbing. If there are some research works in Cameroon, they become scarcer when we go to Gabon and almost nonexistent for the case of the Republic of Congo.

Yet, the phenomenon is very present in all three countries. Moreover, the literature is more foreign investor-oriented and the intranational perspective of forestland grabbing is neglected. Very little research in Cameroon discusses the local elite and authorities as facilitators, but not as grabbers. These neglected issues are an important aspect if addressing the land grabbing phenomenon is to contribute to sustainability.

Keywords

Land Rush, Large-Scale Land Acquisition, Land Control, Peasantry, Land Tenure, Land Governance

1. Introduction

The conjunction of climate, food, and financial crises in the late 2000s has caused a return of interest in large investments in farmland. This phenomenon has been considered the global land grab (Oliveira et al., 2021a; Yang & He, 2021; Matondi et al., 2011). According to estimates by the International Land Coalition based at the International Fund for Agricultural Development, 57 million hectares of land were leased to foreign investors between 2007 and 2012 (Allan et al., 2012). In 2024, Statista records that Africa is the most affected continent by land grabbing in the world, with a score of more than 50% of the global land grabbing.

That is probably why Demissie (2015) indicates that Africa is on sale and Batterbury and Ndi (2018) confirm that widely acknowledged as a global phenomenon, land-grabbing is particularly prevalent in Africa.

This continent currently accounts for 2344 deals up till now¹ with 168 deals in the last 90 days. That is the reason Antoinette et al. (2015) thought earlier that African land is the most appealing and vulnerable to acquisition. In this continent, if the Democratic Republic of Congo leads the score with 9.6 million hectares of land to foreign investors, the ratio between the territory and the land yielded makes Cameroon the most impacted country by land grabbing in the world with a score of 8.5% of its territory having been yielded to foreign investors (Statista, 2024).

For Demissie (2015), far from being just a technical issue associated with good governance, the problem of land grabbing by transnational actors and states is a serious issue for food security in Africa and in the world. Antoinette et al. (2015) think that African land has become the most appealing and vulnerable to acquisition. All this literature demonstrates the context of land dynamics and the moves in land tenure management in Africa (Lanz, 2014; Matondi et al., 2011; Nyantakyi-Frimpong, 2013). It might be relevant to recall that land is the resource which contains and allows the production of other vital resources for human existence. Its scarcity might be a cause of severe social crises and political upheavals,

¹Today is August 23, 2025.

besides being the principal cause of poverty, hunger, and inter/intra communities' conflicts.

Studies on land grabbing in general and forestland grabbing in particular have shown just little interest in the Central African context. When browsing through journals of reference like *Land Use Policy*, it is observed that most studies have been dedicated to the Latin American context first, and in Africa, many studies have focused on West and Eastern Africa. In this journal, a random examination of the fifty latest issues on land grabbing demonstrates that Senegal, Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Ivory Coast, Zambia, Tanzania, Sudan, and Sierra Leone are the only specific African countries from which research on land grabbing has been published.

Likewise, a random examination of the twenty-six latest issues on land grabbing in the *Journal of Land and Rural Studies* shows that only Ghana, Nigeria, Benin, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Ethiopia have been of scientific interest. The *Open Journal of Forestry* is an interesting case for Central Africa. In addition to publications relating to the above-mentioned countries, there are publications in Francophone African countries like Burkina Faso, Niger, and Cameroon. The latter, which is a Central African country, has about four articles on land grabbing, land use, and land cover.

The fifty latest publications of the *Journal Land* demonstrate that there has been a strong focus on Zambia, Ghana, Malawi, Gabon, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Mozambique. This is also an interesting case for our focus because we have one publication on Gabon, which is a central African country. A random selection of the fifty latest issues of the *African Journal of Land Policy and Geospatial Sciences* demonstrates the same interest in western and eastern Africa. There are about two studies on Cameroon focusing on land policy and climate change, not on land grabbing.

This random selection of some open access journals with an interesting impact factor demonstrates that there has been less interest in studying land grabbing as a whole and forestland grabbing in Central Africa and in the Congo Basin, compared to Asia, Latin America, West and Eastern Africa. Is it because the phenomenon is not very present in these countries? The answer will very obviously be no. For the case of Cameroon, Gabon, and Congo, there is an interesting alert by civil society organizations on massive land grabbing in the Congo Basin.

In Cameroon, an interesting scientific work on land grabbing has been done by authors like Nongni (2024), Meliki (2021), Ndi (2019a, 2019b) and Njoh (2017). While Meliki (2021) talks about land grabbing by elites, that is not the main focus of his discussion. Instead, he explores two ranges of practices, residential multilocality and sorcery, through the lens of resilience of local communities facing scarcity. Legault and Cochrane (2021) observe, for instance, that Gabon, a largely forested state in Central Africa, has been neglected in the land rush conversations, despite having over half of its land allocated to forestry, agriculture, and mining concessions. There is therefore a need to fill the scientific gap by trying to make available the research done with an interest in forestland grabbing in the Congo

Basin. The objective of this article is to contribute to providing the Congo Basin with scientific documentation on land grabbing as a whole and forest land grabbing in particular.

By definition, we consider forestland grabbing here as an act of occupation of large scales of land (scale of capital) in forestry areas by actors with substantial financial or material resources, in a situation of unbalanced cognitive, political, or economic resources among involved actors, with the aim of accumulation, in a scope of action whereby vulnerable populations are dispossessed of their customary lands, being their principal resource for survival, and the network of foreign or local land controllers, who may be multinationals, international or local elites, is widened, with the consequence of intensifying the social and political economic gap between the capitalistic elites and the communities. Lightly different from the concept of green grabbing (Rocheleau, 2017), forestland grabbing includes non-valued forest and primary forestlands.

The insufficiency of scientific literature in that domain encourages us to integrate grey literature in this review in order to provide a clearer understanding of forestland grabbing in the Congo Basin. An analysis of the various documents (scientific articles, working papers, and reports included because of the scarcity of scientific research) and data sets (Statista, World Bank, and Land Matrix) has allowed us to focus on these specific themes as the most relevant in the literature: the concept and drivers of forestland grabbing in the African context, the structure and the processes of forestland grabbing in Africa: the cases of Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo, and the local contestations, economic violence, and resilience strategies caused by land grab in the Congo Basin's peasantries. They are systematically examined with a comparative approach from the perspectives of Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo. But before discussing the literature, we deemed it relevant to first proceed to a systemic conceptual operationalization of the concepts of land grabbing and forestland grabbing.

2. The Concept and the Drivers of Land Grabbing in the African Context

One of the issues that has most attracted the attention of observers, whether from civil society or the scientific community, is that of land grabbing. This has been the subject of several studies in these localities (Houedji & Diallo, 2022; Abate, 2020; Woods, 2020; Van Bockstael, 2019; Santiago, 2019; Batterbury & Ndi, 2018; Broegaard et al., 2017; Lisk, 2017). It is also of significant interest for international public policies on sustainable development (Agunyai & Amusan, 2023; Ashukem, 2020). Legault and Cochrane (2021) consider that over the last decade, the land rush (grabbing) discourse has analyzed foreign investments in land and agriculture across the world, with Africa being a particularly targeted continent due to the scale of acquisitions that have taken place (Nongni, 2024; Havnevik, 2011; Kandel, 2017; Cotula, 2009). One of the challenges in conducting scientific research on land grabbing in the Congo Basin is the ambiguity surrounding this

concept, which often causes debate and disagreement. This literature review begins with a discussion to build consensus on the meaning of these concepts in this work, before examining how researchers and organizations have approached them. Thereafter, it will be relevant to examine the drivers of land grabbing in Africa before discussing the different approaches to the phenomenon by the authors.

2.1. What Is Land Grabbing Today in the Congo Basin Context?

Land grabbing? Large-scale land acquisitions? Enclosures? Global scholars, policy practitioners, and activists rarely agree on how to describe current interest in land, although they generally concur that since 2007, investors' interest has skyrocketed. While the underlying minimalist consensus about a worldwide upsurge in land deals is notable, the disagreements go beyond terminology, are far from academic, and need to be aired (Edelman, Oya, & Borrás Jr., 2013). It is yet of prior importance to consider with Feintrenie et al. (2014) the fact that land grabbing usually refers to the controversial acquisition of a piece of land. As such, it is a social concept. It deals with social and cultural use of and access to land, and with land tenure, including customary and legal rights (Kenfack Essougong & Tegua, 2019; Ekei & Epie, 2022).

While the concept of land grabbing in general and in Africa specifically has been the subject of debate for years, both in scientific paradigms and in the grey literature, the World Bank (Holmén, 2015), the FAO (2009), international research institutes such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) (Von Braun & Meinzen-Dick, 2009; Holmén, 2015) and aid agencies (Holmén, 2015) speak with some caution of a surge in “foreign investment in land,” while a number of activist actors prefer to warn of a “massive land grab,” which implies that domestic farmers will be forced to leave the land they have been cultivating for generations, to be replaced by foreigners (Holmén, 2015). Oliveira et al. (2021a, 2021b) prefer to talk about a broader form of dispossession and mechanisms of control and value grabbing beyond the classic land grab for agriculture. This global apprehension of land grabbing needs to be systematically contextualized for a suitable understanding as Akram-Lodhi (2012) attempts in his research.

According to Holmén (2015), the term “land grabbing” has recently attracted widespread, sometimes agitated, attention, and its literature is growing at an exponential rate. At the same time, the concept remains poorly understood, both in terms of its meaning, extent, and consequences, and even in terms of who is grabbing it. The various attempts to define land grabbing seem to reflect ideological lenses and predefined positions rather than a genuine ambition to discover what is really going on. The land grabbing process provides a strong argument to justify the ambiguity surrounding this concept.

According to Borrás et al. (2012), the FAO works in Latin America consider that land deals are to be understood as land grabs when three conditions are present, namely: the scale of land deals should be large, using a commonly-accepted baseline of a minimum of a thousand hectares for a single deal; there should be

the direct involvement of foreign governments; and the new land investments are seen to have a negative impact on the food security of the recipient country (Kenfack et al., 2016; Nguiffo & Sonkoue Watio, 2015). In this same line, Nongni (2024) highlights four indicators for there to be a situation considered as land grabbing: the size of the farm estate, the means of acquisition, the actors involved in land grabbing and the destination of the crops produced.

The challenge with this definition is its contextualization to the Congo Basin context. In an environment where the forest is seriously threatened, a scale of more than 50 hectares by an individual is already considered large. This is even more relevant if we consider the power balance between the States, which generally have the upper hand in land distribution, and the populations of rural communities, who have no security over the small plots they have succeeded in valuing. This definition also ignores the dimension of intra-national actors in the dynamics of land grab. It is also relevant to complement it with the aspect of the process and the respect of the regulation in land deals leading to a massive dispossession of community lands in contexts whereby the customary law and the positive law negotiate the possibility of cohabitation between the States and the communities over the same lands (Nguiffo et al., 2009).

In most cases, land grabbing situations involve an exchange between the land grabber and those who previously occupied the land. Generally, this involves money or other forms of donations. Authors such as Kenfack (2019) see it more as a fire sale. It would remain at the level of a fire sale if we applied the principle of *Caveat Emptor* in ancient Roman law, which stipulated that between the buyer and the seller, each should preserve their interests. The deceit in this situation is to be apprehended from the angle of land concentration, which is considered by Borrás et al. (2012) as an important determinant of land grabbing and the consequent capital accumulation.

However, from a perspective of fairness, it is important, in the case of large-scale land transactions, to take into consideration the material and cognitive resources available to the seller and the buyer and to see the impact of the transaction on the experience and fate of the vulnerable actor in the transaction. As Borrás et al. (2012) observe, the peculiarity of land grabbing even when there is an exchange is that it is generally assumed that such land deals are shady in character, facilitated by corrupt government officials (or local authorities) and result in the expulsion of local communities from their land (or dispossession of land by the vulnerable populations which need that land to survive).

From the literature, Holmén (2015) considers that “grabbing” implies that smallholders are dispossessed of their land through interventions by outside actors (Kitabu, 2012), and b) that this is done by illegal means (Durán, 2012). Land grabbing has also been interpreted as ‘foreignization’ (Zoomers, 2010) and is seen by many as a neo-colonial scramble for Africa (Mlambo, 2024; Moyo et al., 2018). As such, it is seen to represent a capitalist restructuring of global agriculture (Akram-Lodhi, 2012). Less critical writers prefer concepts such as “acquisitions” or “large-scale investments in land” (FAO, 2009; Deininger & Byerlee, 2011).

If the concept of foreignization is important in the definition of land grabbing, its contextualization in the Congo Basin context, principally in Cameroon, Gabon, and Congo, must take into account the intra-national diversity of identities and the weight of the considerations of indigenous and alien populations. The communities' dynamics make peoples to be considered as intranational foreigners even in their country. From the perspective of social classes (the elites and the masses), there is also a tendency to consider an elite with poor impact in his community development as a symbolic foreigner. The concept of foreignization therefore has to be critically analyzed when it comes to discussing the concept of land grabbing in the Congo Basin context.

At this point, we agree with [Borras et al. \(2012\)](#) that a fundamental starting point is to clarify that land grabbing is essentially “control grabbing,” understood as the power to control land and other associated resources such as water in order to derive benefit from such control. Talking about the notion of scale, we equally think with these authors that the scale of capital should be considered as the unit of analysis, including land as central in the operation of capital, while avoiding a focus on the scale of land acquisitions only, which tends to miss or underemphasize in analysis the underlying broader logic and operation of capital. In that sense, 300 ha of high-value vineyards, 5000 ha of a rare metal mining concession, 100,000 ha of land for industrial tree plantation, and 500,000 ha of grazing land for livestock may in fact represent comparable scales in terms of capital ([Borras et al., 2012](#)).

According to [Hall \(2013a\)](#), critical scholars have made extensive use of the concepts of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession to analyze the global land grab. These concepts have been crucial to efforts to understand the land grab in terms of the creation, expansion, and reproduction of capitalist social relations, of accumulation by extra-economic means, and of dispossessory responses to capitalist crises. A central feature of the academic literature on the “global land grab” is the explanation of the post-2006 surge in large-scale land acquisitions for (especially) crop production and resource extraction in terms of the dynamics and contemporary transformations of capitalism. From Hall's perspective, the land grab literature has used primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession to analyze three main (and often overlapping) processes: dispossessory responses to capitalist crises, the use of extra-economic means of capital accumulation, and the creation, expansion, and reproduction of capitalist social relations.

Dispossession may not simply be the physical loss of land but the loss of some land rights, even for formal title holders, or in other words, not land grabbing but what some have called “control grabbing”. Therefore, formalization may not prevent forms of dispossession and, in some cases, may facilitate dispossession. Ultimately, [Stein and Cunningham \(2017\)](#) argue that formalization may facilitate land grabbing, in part because of unequal power dynamics embedded in rural Africa. The above research permits us to derive that one parameter to define land grab is the processes. Besides this parameter, it can also be important to discuss the place

of the area of the land in the consideration of land grabbing as a concept.

Therefore, we consider land grab as an act of occupation of a large scale of lands (scale of capital) by actors with substantial financial or material resources, in a situation of unbalanced cognitive, political, or economic resources amongst involved actors, with the aim of accumulation, in a scope of action whereby vulnerable populations are dispossessed of their customary lands, being their principal resource for survival, and the network of foreign or local land controllers, who may be multinationals, international or local elites, is widened, with the consequence of the intensification of the social and political economic gap between the capitalistic elite and the communities. Moreover, if there is a global land grab as a concept, we suggest alternating it when it comes to specific country studies to focus on “local land grab” or “intranational land grab”. These dimensions seem to be neglected in land grab studies.

2.2. The Drivers of Land Grabbing in the African Context

The main argument which is provided by investors to justify the land rush in Africa is the availability of underutilized and cheap land (Cotula et al., 2014). This author provides a great summary of the recent literature on land grabbing in Africa, illuminated with colorful and detailed case studies from his own research across a range of African countries. The picture he paints of land grabbing in Africa is a complex one, shaped by its historical antecedents and driven by national and international interests and actors alike. He makes an effort to challenge a range of commonly held assumptions about the drivers, the extent, and the impacts of land grabbing in Africa. One of his recurring arguments concerns the often neglected ‘historicity’ of current land deals.

While land grabbing is often discussed in an ahistorical way, Cotula (2013b) argues that the commoditization of land has been going on for a very long time, and the land rush merely constitutes an acceleration of that process. He reminds us that only by looking back at colonialism and land acquisitions made after colonialism can we possibly understand today’s land rush and the impact it is having on the continent (Cotula, 2013a; Liberti, 2011). By designating vast tracts of land as vacant and vesting them in the state, devaluing customary rights to land as mere “use rights”, and by considerably strengthening the power of traditional chiefs and consequently remolding the relationship between chiefs and citizens from one based on political allegiance and supply of military services into an economic relationship between a landlord and a tenant, the colonial era significantly shaped many countries’ legal frameworks and political systems.

In Cameroon, Ashukem (2020) argues that with the rapidly increasing demand for land and the use of agricultural production for food and energy, the bioeconomy, coupled with the Sustainable Development Goals, has inexorably exacerbated the practice of land grabbing in sub-Saharan Africa, where land is perceived as abundant, empty, and unused. Sub-Saharan Africa has once again been primarily perceived as a stable source of land for the production of food and non-food

crops. In rural societies, when land is not lacking, it is relatively easy for a foreigner to obtain cultivable plots: a few symbolic offerings, a few royalties in labor or in kind, or even in money, are enough to obtain land on which one can enjoy the fruits of one's labor as long as the land produces. After a few years, agricultural yields decrease, and the field is abandoned: it is then necessary to obtain a new concession (Filleron, 2003).

Drivers of land grabbing in Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular could be perceived at three levels (Antoinette et al., 2015). First, international guidelines regulating against global land grabbing lack the necessary binding force to compel host states to take the necessary measures to enforce the guidelines and thus promote responsible agricultural investments. Second, the land rights of subsistence Cameroonians are not formally recognized in the Cameroonian land tenure system, making it difficult for vulnerable populations to challenge these allocations or receive compensation in the event of expropriation. Third, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) follow-up in Cameroon is entirely investor-driven: its system does not encourage joint follow-up activity initiated by all stakeholder groups involved in it.

3. The Structure and Processes of Forestland Grabbing in Africa: The Cases of Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo

Land grabbing per se is not a new phenomenon, given its historical precedents in the eras of imperialism. However, the character, scale, pace, and orientations of key drivers of recent waves of land grabs are a distinct historical event closely tied to the changing dynamics of the global agri-food, feed, and fuel complex (Margulis et al., 2014). It is therefore important, with the intention of having a current insight into the phenomenon, to discuss its current dynamics from the existing and available literature, trying to grasp its structure and its processes. The focus of this section is on Central Africa, where the Congo Basin is found in particular. The literature concerns research done in Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo.

Talking about its structure, Cotula et al. (2014) picture a frame involving an apparently simple configuration of two actors: the acquirer and the provider. In the African context, the acquirer is generally a private or a joint equity company, but it can also be a foreign government acquiring land directly or a local elite, if we refer to Meliki (2021). On the other side of the deal, the provider is more likely a government or rarely a private land owner. This apparently simple picture hides a complex structure of actors and negotiations. This structure also pictures the process of land grabbing by foreign investors, but does not really take into account the intranational dynamics of land grabbing in the African context, and mostly in the Congo Basin. Neglecting this latter aspect leaves aside an important factor of deforestation of the second largest forest in the world, with a serious impact on the global ecological balance, and of vulnerability of local communities, whose link to the environment and economic lifestyle is often subject to violent socioeconomic

changes. They are generally not protected by the law, except if they subscribe to a land title property. Moreover, their customary rights are not often recognized when faced with what could normally be considered as the general interest. Alden Wily (2014) considers the law as a foe to the land rights and the land security of several billion rural poor who traditionally own and use untitled lands that are classified as state lands or unowned public lands in national laws.

According to Holmén (2015), land-grab literature commonly points out that, in Africa, private land titles are quite rare and it is mostly the government that owns the land. However, in general, governments do not own the land but act as its custodian, presumably in the interests of the people, who enjoy a variety of customary individual and communal use rights. Foreigners can lease, but not own, land that is registered as state land. This nuance is important for the countries of our interest. In Cameroon, the law Order No. 74/1 of July 6, 1974, establishing the land regime, states that the State of Cameroon is the custodian of all lands in the national domain in Cameroon. In Gabon, the law N°15/63 establishing the general system of land ownership, regulating registration, the publicity of real estate rights, and the obligations of the registrar, clearly states that the State is the owner of all the lands that do not have a private land title. In the Republic of Congo, land tenure is governed by a dual system. The majority of the population utilizes a community land rights system, where land registration is required for legal recognition but is often complicated and costly. Additionally, a distinct system recognizes the collective and individual rights of indigenous peoples to land and resources. The Republic of Congo also has a Land Policy document, which is currently undergoing provincial consultations for a more participatory land reform process.

In Gabon, land grabbing or land rushing did not just come with the 2008 economic and petroleum crises. Legault and Cochrane (2021) state that some foreign land holdings in Gabon were granted during the colonial era, which in some cases have been transferred to new investors, obscuring their acquisition histories. Analyzing the land rush from this broader context, and not limiting it to the land rush of the past fifteen years, they find that Gabon has one of the highest percentages of land granted to investors in the world. Of the country's 26.8 million hectares of land, 14.2 million (53%) have been granted as forest concessions and agricultural investments. The lands that have been acquired exist within the broader Congo Rainforest, wherein Gabonese history and its people's interactions are intertwined and interconnected with the forest (Legault & Cochrane, 2021). Gabon is highlighted by these authors as one of the most impacted countries by the land rush, but also the least researched. Despite the gravity of the situation in Gabon, with more than half of all land transferred to investors, as far as Legault and Cochrane (2021) are aware, no study analyzes the acquisition of Gabonese land and forests at the macro scale.

This situation is facilitated by the land tenure context. In Gabon, all land, water, and minerals belong to the state. This is not unique in sub-Saharan Africa, where colonial-era land laws were implemented by European states to codify their rights

over territories and natural resource extraction. However, unlike other countries, Gabon did not participate in the wave of decolonizing state land ownership (propelled by Structural Adjustment Programs), which occurred up into the 1990s (in countries such as Sudan, Malawi, and Uganda) (Alden Wily, 2012; Legault & Cochrane, 2021).

In Gabon, these colonial-era laws have been upheld and do not recognize traditional and historic land occupiers, resulting in the discreditation of local and Indigenous people from access to customary land rights. Alden Wily & Faure (2012) mention that, for over a century, the people have endured dispossession of their lands and resources, both in law and in practice. This began in 1899 when France declared itself the owner of the soil. Virtually the entire country was then allocated to French logging companies. As well as making money for themselves and the colonial administration, these companies served as the state in remote areas, helping collect taxes and control waterways. Thus began the long association of aligned state and private business, which still characterizes Gabon today.

In total, an estimated 85 to 95% of all land is legally state-owned, with only 14,000 private titles in the entire country as of 2011 (Alden Wily, 2012; Legault & Cochrane, 2021). Land tenure security is therefore extremely poor, and the State can easily confer land property to an investor without any obstruction from the communities. This situation equally justifies the difficulty of talking about land grabbing when the deals implicate local elites or naturalized individuals. Yet, the density of land conflicts in Gabon demonstrates that individuals can at times feel dispossessed of their lands, even though juridically, it would be challenging to claim land with no property title according to the positive law. It is also important to note that the fact that Gabon does not legally acknowledge the customary land system has not absolutely obliterated customary land tenure practices at the ground root level.

According to the findings of Legault and Cochrane (2021), the land rush discourse has focused on the recent mass acquisition of agricultural land in the Global South, most often by foreign actors (Cotula, 2012; Cotula, 2013a; Cochrane & Andrews, 2021; Legault & Cochrane, 2021). Forestry concessions are not always considered a part of this “land rush”. Anseeuw (2013) acknowledges and suggests that these acquisitions often pre-date the 2007/08 period. This is one reason why Gabon has been under-researched, combined with its position as a Francophone state and its small population, amongst other geographic biases, as per Cochrane and Thornton (2018). All these factors contribute to Gabon’s invisibility in the global land rush discussion. We emphasize in this review the need to take a closer look at the dynamics of land grabbing in Gabon. A failure to give proper attention to its intranational aspect might lead to more severe conflicts in the future and have a negative impact on the efforts to reduce the global ecological regime crisis.

In Cameroon, given the complexities involved in land ownership and the fact that the country’s law does not fully recognize the existing customary system of land ownership (Fonjong et al., 2010; Ndi et al., 2022), foreign investors can ac-

quire land only through the government (Ndi et al., 2022). Much of the land earmarked for grabbing is/was owned by communities, mostly located in peripheral areas far from urban centers and used by communities to generate their livelihoods. In forest areas, it is mostly the forest land grabbing phenomenon. Large Scale Land Acquisition is more factual when it comes to forestlands. This is because this land is part of the national domain according to the law of 1974, and the national land tenure system does not recognize that category of land as belonging to the communities. Only private lands can be protected by non-State actors like communities.

The state, however, considers such land as “empty” or “underutilized”, a designation which confers upon the Cameroonian State, as well as State auxiliaries, the unquestionable authority to allocate such lands to potential investors (Fonjong et al., 2016; Ndi et al., 2022). This presents a highly centralized, elite-driven, and top-down approach to land transfer (Feintrenie et al., 2014; Fonjong et al., 2016; Ndi & Batterbury, 2017), in which local chiefs and political elites are co-opted to facilitate land deals at the village level in ways that illustrate the neo-patrimonial character of the Cameroonian state. Cameroonian elites are active in LSLAs both as investors and facilitators of acquisition by foreign companies (Fonjong et al., 2016). The latest dynamics, which are to be documented in the intranational dimension of land grabbing, which we encourage from this literature, demonstrate that local elites currently acquire large-scale lands, to either convert them to agriculture, touristic sites, or leave them unexploited, with the logic of gaining benefits from their sale in the future when investors or natural resource exploiters come.

Fonjong et al. (2016) reveal that governments, chiefs, and to some extent elites play key roles in formal and informal processes that grant land to investors. However, both processes neglect women and affected communities because there are no mechanisms to hold actors accountable to them, especially to women who depend on land for their livelihood. A legal framework that makes the process transparent and promotes accountability and gender inclusiveness is indispensable according to Fonjong et al. (2016). This research is very interesting because it shows the relevance of the intranational implications in land grabbing processes by demonstrating that land grabs also involve elites. Yet, it doesn't discuss the grabbing aspect by these elites as direct intranational beneficiaries, but as facilitators to foreign investments. This tendency has made observable the fact that some elites would try to grab land under the care of factual or fictive (perhaps) foreign companies.

Land grabbing in Cameroon also has to be apprehended from the perspective of the neo-patrimonial State. The implications of the neo-patrimonial dynamics of the Cameroonian polity become acutely visible in the actions of such powerful political elites, especially in their strategic use of patron-client networks to leverage traditional authorities into compliance to serve as proxy enablers of land deals. Fonjong et al. (2016) coin the phrase neo-patrimonial transnationalism to more aptly capture the intentionality that underlies these highly transactional processes of “favor exchanges” (be they pecuniary, political, and/or symbolic, etc.) as well

as the somewhat peculiar nature of the quid pro quo dynamics between powerful political elites on the one hand (often acting at the behest of foreign land investors) and resident traditional authorities in communities targeted for LSLA on the other (Ndi et al., 2022).

The current level of land grabbing in Cameroon would not have been possible without the active involvement of certain traditional authorities, doubly serving as de facto representatives of local peoples and at the same time as proxy enablers of land grabbing within Cameroon's neopatrimonial order. There is a need for sound policies to tackle the accountability problems arising from this ambivalent role that traditional authorities play (Ndi et al., 2022). The drawback at the community level is the pauperization of peasants.

In Cameroon, Ashukem (2016) demonstrates that, to the extent that the principle embodies aspects of procedural rights such as rights to information and participation, which are often conspicuously lacking in land grabbing deals, its application in and during land grabbing could be useful in laying the foundation for the recognition, promotion, and enforcement of local community rights. This dynamic makes communities more precarious in the context of plural intervention. In Congo, the dynamic is different. There is almost no research on these aspects of forest land grabbing. There are data we collected from the field, which are not fit for this review, but which will be used in research papers to come. This phenomenon is still to be explored in the Republic of Congo.

4. Land Grab and Peasantries in the Congo Basin: Local Contestations, Economic Violence and Resilience Strategies

Historically, research on land grab in peasantries was mostly developed between the years 2007 and 2012. Edelman et al. (2013) note that all the papers here have underscored the importance of taking the dynamic agrarian change and global capital accumulation as key reference points. A broad agrarian political economy framework critically examines the dynamics of production and reproduction, and how power, property, and labor are politically contested and transformed over time. This poses questions about relations between different forms of agrarian capital (foreign and domestic and new wealth, land-rich/money poor, money-rich/land poor, and so on) about the possibilities and impediments that exist in any given context to the development of capitalist social relations in agriculture (Hall, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2015). While the question of land property relations is central to the understanding of agrarian change, it is not the only important issue that deserves careful scrutiny. A broader agrarian political economy perspective goes beyond land property relations-centric analysis to include other closely linked issues (Edelman et al., 2013).

In Cameroon, attempts to dispossess communities of their land have generated varied forms of conflict and resistance (active and passive) across rural communities. Inadequate consultation, unfulfilled promises, uncertainty, and mistrust

surrounding investment projects combine in people's minds with concerns over their environmental effects. It is worth noting that communities' contestations of large-scale land acquisition are inscribed in the historical DNA of Cameroon's populations, even though the power of the colonial master, the unbalanced power with the State, and the hegemony of the elites have not always been favorable to their claims. Yet it has to be noted that these have not been radical contestations because the idea of contestation is not often a property claim-driven action, but a way to maximize their gains in the process of large-scale acquisition. Hence, the pressures on land use and land ownership make the populations aware of the necessity to gradually shift to a property-based claim action.

Ndi (2017) relates that large-scale land acquisitions in South West Cameroon were less contentious in the past, when the population density was lower and land was considered more abundant. During the German colonial administration (1884-1916), colonizers appropriated land for agricultural production, including for palm, rubber, pepper, tea, and banana cultivation (Bederman, 1966). There was resistance against external agricultural companies. Most of the conflicts recorded with the Germans (before World War I) and later the British and French (after World War I) were not a direct result of land acquisition but were campaigns for higher wages, better working conditions, or protests against late paychecks (Bederman, 1966; Konings, 2008).

Currently, large-scale land acquisition by foreign interests is a major driver of agrarian change in productive regions of Africa. Rural communities in Southwest Cameroon are facing a series of political conflicts resulting from large-scale land acquisition, in which commercial interests threaten local land-use practices and access to land. The struggle to maintain or redefine livelihoods generates tensions between internal competition and external contestation of land claims. In the Nguti district, the scene of protests against a particular agribusiness company, debate continues over ideas, interests, and perceptions of land and land tenure. The authors show how top-down land acquisition marginalizes land users, leading to conflicts within communities and with the companies involved, and conclude that for an agricultural project to succeed and avoid major conflicts, the dominance of elite interests must give way to a more inclusive process (Ndi, 2017).

In the forest massif east of Kribi in southern Cameroon, actors with asymmetrical relationships coexist. The State, the legal owner of the forest areas; agro-industries; logging companies; and elites, considered exogenous actors by locals, are monopolizing vast forest areas to the detriment of the local Bagyéli (Pygmies) and Bantu communities. This has led to a deterioration in their quality of life, and their protests have remained ineffective. This situation is due to the coexistence of modern land rights provisions, which grant the State ownership of all unregistered land, with the community mode of use of the forest area, considered ancestral heritage on the basis of the "law of the first occupant" and the "right of the axe."

Concerning economic violence, these exogenous actors transform the original demographic and economic context and trigger various peasant responses

whose disruptive effects are felt both within local communities and in the forest environment. This aggravates the precariousness of local populations and exacerbates tensions that are now more latent (Elong & Obam, 2010). Thus, Krieger and Leroch (2016) propose a comprehensive model of the political economy of land grabbing. It is based on arguments related to the allocation of property rights, societal power relations in the center-periphery dimension, as well as distributive, ethnic, and resource-depleting conflicts. In times of global “land rush,” the (corrupt) elite of the center increasingly considers land in the periphery as a valuable resource, thus challenging the existing formal or informal land rights of the local population. This intrusion of the state into the periphery could be the source of significant (ethnic) demands leading to disagreements and conflicts (Krieger & Leroch, 2016). The consequence is the emergence of a need among peasant populations to develop resilient activities to compensate for the scarcity of land.

A critical analysis of patterns of land grabbing and commoditization by big capital or State-funded agribusinesses and elites in Cameroon reveals that the social phenomenon is a major obstacle to local livelihood concerns and sustainable development (Mope, 2011). The evidence suggests that the government and local administrations have played a seminal role in assisting land acquisitions, and in turn, the processes have resulted in the neglect of traditional land and resource rights. Parastatal agro-industrial complexes have taken advantage of the opportunities provided in the modern land law for private property rights and the weak defense offered by customary land tenure systems to engage in the accumulation of huge arable and accessible agricultural lands in the hinterlands. On the other hand, (traditional and modern) elites as important stakeholders and power brokers have facilitated land acquisitions and/or increasing outright sales through the expropriation and appropriation of community lands (Mope, 2011).

The capitalist market-oriented economy, existing and new opportunities facilitate land deals by ascribed- and achievement-based local elites on the one hand, and their plans are the root cause of uprisings and violent conflicts over land and resource rights, on the other. Such activities are detrimental to good governance, regional integration, peace-building, and social mobility. On the basis of the culturally defined rights and preferential access attached to the high social status of Fons, they can acquire more land anywhere in their chiefdoms, as well as even invade neighboring chiefdoms to satisfy their increasing interests and changing material needs today (Mope, 2011).

According to this author, land acquisitions by local elites are mainly resource seeking rather than market seeking. Admittedly, elites have invested in some of the acquired lands by engaging in modern agro-pastoral activities with remarkable increases in productivity and accruing financial wealth. The examples of capitalist irrigated rice production in the Ndop Plain and improved cattle rearing here and there have been discussed. It is clear that rampant interchiefdom clashes over ownership rights of patches of arable and grazing lands do not augur well for individual

and collective security, the dynamics of contemporary local and national politics, and poverty eradication for the vast majority of rural households. Rather, the complex and interrelated events that are unfolding have resulted in the reinforcement of gender stratification and gender inequalities, which are politically and therefore socially controlled in the largely patriarchal communities (Mope, 2011).

Beyond the Cameroon context, the global land rush has spurred small, modest, and large anti-land grab mobilizations, notably the food sovereignty movement. This movement has been instrumental in representing the interests of small-scale family farmers whose livelihoods are threatened by capitalist control over land in the countryside. However, this dominant narrative tends to overlook or de-emphasize some important diversity within the peasantry. The taking of private land for public purpose by the eminent domain of the State is a global phenomenon, but it displaces and marginalizes people at the local level (Guha, 2022). Hence, defending their access to land has always been a major motivation for rural people to mobilize locally, nationally, and, more recently, in global struggles against land grabbing (McKeon, 2014). That is why we deemed it relevant to discuss the literature on the transmutation land grabbing has on African peasantry economic systems. McKeon (2014) analyzes how rural social movements have built up their capacities as global mobilizers and policy players over the past decade. He assesses the success with which they are exploiting the current window of political opportunity opened up by interlinked global food, fuel, climate, and financial crises, accompanied by the highly publicized phenomenon of land grabbing. This research allows us to be interested in how, in the African context, and mostly in the Congo Basin, rural movements defend their rights and access to land.

5. Conclusion

This review starts from the observation that research on land grabbing in the Congo Basin has drawn less attention than the focus of researchers in other parts of Africa and the world. This is not because the phenomenon is not present in this part of the continent. Moreover, global land grabbing has mostly been approached from the perspective of foreign acquisition. Less attention has been given to intranational land grabbing. One of the neglected aspects of intranational land grabbing is forestland grabbing by elites. This could be considered as a current intranational or local imperialism if we link it with the historical perspective of land grabbing in Africa.

In this line, Nkankeu and Ngamini (2010) note that the expropriation of indigenous lands and their allocation either to missionaries or to agricultural firms was a strategy for consolidating power in the conquered territories. From 1884 (the official date of the German entry into Cameroon) to 1903, Cameroon successively experienced several land and property regimes. The two basic texts that formed the framework of the legislation in this area during the German period were, on the one hand, the decree of 15 June 1896 on the creation, taking possession and alienation of the crown domain, the acquisition and alienation of land in Came-

room, and on the other hand, the imperial decree of 21 November 1902 relating to land rights in the German colonies. The decree of June 15, 1896 was a remnant of the legislation based on the law of April 17, 1886 relating to the legal situation of the German colonies. It could be interesting to give more attention to this research issue with the aim of contributing to sustainable management of lands. The intranational dimension of forestland grabbing in Cameroon could be explained, from the literature, by the continuation of the colonial dynamics in contemporary forestland governance.

In Gabon, there is less literature on forestland grabbing than in Cameroon. Yet the phenomenon is very present, even though its impact is not currently seriously felt thanks to the weak ratio between the population and the territory. It is nevertheless important to keenly anticipate research on this phenomenon before it worsens. The reality of the Republic of Congo is quite impressive. There is no available research on the phenomenon, whereas forestland grabbing by elites is an interesting object to study in that country.

This review had as its aim to draw the attention of researchers to the importance of the intranational dimension of forestland grabbing in the Congo Basin. The intranational dimension of forestland grabbing gives the possibility to examine the mutations in the relationship between the elites and the peasants. With the obvious discourse of the dominion of the elites, it could be interesting to check the evidence of the weapons of the weak (Scott, 1985).

Moreover, exploring intranational forestland grabbing can considerably substantiate the scientific discussion on the elite capture theory (Táiwò, 2022; German et al., 2013) or the rent-seeking theory (Tullock, 1967; Krueger, 1974). In the initial work of both Tullock and Krueger, it was assumed that profit-seeking businessmen would be willing to use resources in an effort to obtain a monopoly, whether privately or government-sponsored, up to the point where the last dollar so invested exactly counterbalanced the improved probability of obtaining the monopoly. This theoretical framework would be interesting for understanding the interactions between elites and peasant populations around forestland grabbing, and we believe these would be fruitful perspectives to be explored in future research articles.

This is the first article in a series we intend to publish on the intranational dimension of forestland grabbing in the Congo Basin. This research has been conducted thanks to the Applied Research in Ecology and Social Sciences (RESSAC) project, sponsored by the European Union. Our perspective is therefore to publish new articles in the near future on the political economy of forestland grabbing by elites in the Congo Basin. In perspective, aspects such as the legal construction of forestland grabbing by elites, the gender aspect of land dynamics in the era of the imbalanced power between the elites and the peasants, the role of administrative and traditional authorities in the circumvention of legal procedures, the impact of forestland grabbing on both community underdevelopment and ecosystem services loss, and so on are some aspects which could be of interest for future research

papers.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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