

Policy piece

Linking science and policy to address conservation concerns about African land use, land conversion and land grabs in the era of globalization

Samuel T. Osinubi^{1,2*}, Kate Hand³, Daniëlle C. C. Van Oijen⁴, Bruno A. Walther⁵ and Phoebe Barnard^{1,2}

¹DST-NRF Centre of Excellence, Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, Cape Town, South Africa, ²South African National Biodiversity Institute, Kirstenbosch, Private Bag X7, Claremont 7735, Cape Town, South Africa, ³Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Lodge, Potton, Sandy SG19 2DL, Bedfordshire, U.K., ⁴Vogelbescherming Nederland, PO Box 925, 3700 AX Zeist, The Netherlands and ⁵Master Program in Global Health and Development, College of Public Health and Nutrition, Taipei Medical University, 250 Wu-Hsing St., Taipei 110, Taiwan, China

These are rapidly changing times for biodiversity and society in Africa, with the increasing influence of globalization, and growing rate and scale of land conversion, impacting wildlife ecology and creating a greater need for conservation (Walther, 2016). The theme of the 14th Pan-African Ornithological Congress (PAOC), taking place in Dakar, Senegal, between the 16th and the 21st of October 2016, reflects this context: 'global changes or threats and opportunities for birds in Africa'. The PAOC has gained importance as a key platform for scientists, conservationists and birders – within Africa and beyond – for drawing attention to key conservation matters for proactive action.

Some wildlife face complex global conservation challenges, and migratory bird species are an excellent example (Sanderson *et al.*, 2006; Vickery *et al.*, 2014). They move between countries and therefore require consistent conservation commitment across all range states, supported by international coordination and support. In this context, the UN's Convention on Migratory Species has placed considerable attention on the needs of migratory waterbirds, raptors and landbirds within the

African-Eurasian region (CMS, 2011). In particular, a fresh emphasis is being placed on the impact of land-use conversion on migratory birds, as a major contributor to habitat loss. In fact, habitat loss due to land-use change has been identified as the most important driving threat to conservation in Africa (Slingenberg *et al.*, 2009).

The African continent is the second largest in the world, and home to some of the poorest people (UNEP, 2016). Addressing the challenges of poverty in Africa is vitally important and a priority for many governments and international institutions. However, meeting poverty reduction and economic growth targets has resulted in the acceleration of the rate and scale of land conversion across the continent, some with deleterious or even disastrous environmental consequences (Laurance *et al.*, 2015; Walther, 2016). Development initiatives and environmental conservation need to work hand in hand to ensure that Africa and Africans have a resilient natural environment that supports livelihoods, ecosystem services and wildlife into the future. The newly agreed sustainable development goals, applicable in every country and designed as an integrated set of actions, have strongly underlined this point (UN, 2016).

The drivers of land-use change are complex, and in many cases only poorly understood. They include, in part, governance, international agricultural commodity markets, population growth (and reductions), international investments in infrastructure and increases (and decreases) in rural and urban wealth. These drivers can, in turn, lead to greater demand for food and nonfood crops, livestock and tree products, increased grazing intensity and agricultural intensification, as well as increased demand for agricultural land and changes in agricultural and fire management policies. Agricultural development – both expansion and intensification – is increasingly being seen as a partial solution to Africa's problems of poverty and food insecurity and is therefore a great frontier for agribusinesses (Cleaver & Donovan, 1995). There is a lot of weight behind this view, with agriculture employing 65% of Africa's labour force (World Bank, 2016). Yet, what makes agricultural development an environmentally and politically critical

*Correspondence: E-mail: taymida@yahoo.co.uk

issue is the increasing demand for, and ownership and use of African land and agro-commodities, from outside of Africa (Vidal, 2010; Lowe, 2015; Land Matrix, 2016). There was a great increase in large-scale land deals after the 2007–2008 food crisis, levelling off after prices settled around 2010, but with a clear trend of governments, agribusiness investors and financial sector interests looking to acquire land in low-income countries (ActionAid, 2014). Multinational companies, operating privately or in some cases with the support from their host government, have in recent years bought up African land in at times vast ‘land grabs’ where the rights and needs of local communities have been ignored or illegally violated. Even worse, this often happens with the support of the national government, with land being leased for as little as an annual price of USD 1 per hectare (Ingwe *et al.*, 2010; Vidal, 2010; Lowe, 2015).

Many on our continent wear with contemptible pride the badge of the pitiable African child who is forever in need of someone else to save him or her. Yet, Africans are not pitiable! We are hard workers, strategists, managers and conservationists, and we are responsible masters of our own fate. Inasmuch as trade is better than aid (UN, 2007), we should be fully aware and fully in control of what we are actually bargaining away when we sell land and what we are getting in return. It is not only the responsibility of consumers on other continents to protect our interests by advocating for schemes like Fairtrade and standards like FPIC (Free, Prior and Informed Consent). As scientists, conservationists and birders, we need to connect with those who are working on the national and international drivers of habitat and species loss. Connecting economic, environmental and social goals will strengthen our work because truly sustainable solutions involve the consideration of all three realms, even though it may mean involvement in new and different issues for us. As the African land grab scenario has illustrated, decisions about African land use should be guided by rigorous and binding environmental and social standards that are underpinned by local planning, scientific evidence and the engagement of local communities.

This policy piece is aimed at decisions about African land use being guided by rigorous and binding environmental and social standards, underpinned by local planning, scientific evidence and the engagement of communities. This objective should be achieved through closer engagement between researchers, who often see themselves as

nongovernmental, and policymakers in government, and more functional cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary discussions and actions. We also need to better monitor the true impact and pace of land conversion and the actions being undertaken in our name, as sovereign nations and as a continent.

Conservationists can play an important role in educating local people about their rights to resist land grabs and empowering them to better engage with governments to develop responsible management practices based on scientific evidence. Governmental and nongovernmental funding agencies must support such research collaborations. As the world becomes more and more connected, conservationists need to become more connected with other organizations which also have an interest in preventing land use, land conversion and land grabs which are detrimental to both the ecology of the African wildlife and the lives of the African people.

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