



The Concept of Land Grabbing in the Light of Empirical Evidence in the Moungo Division: The Case of the Municipality of Njombe/Penja

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Abstract

The concept of land grabbing has become very prolific since the period of 2007-2008. And there seems to be a situation of disharmony in the perception of the question of land ownership especially between big and small producers. Small producers are generally considered victims of land grabbing due to the presence of investors who exploit large hectares of land. Focusing on the municipality of Njombe/Penja, this article is based on the argument that, situations of land grabbing can be identified through a certain number of indicators that are noticeable in the literature on land question. The review of the various literatures permitted us to bring out the meaning attributed to the concept of land grabbing as well as some indicators. A qualitative approach to data collection was employed through semi-structured interviews, which equally allowed us to compare these indicators of land grabbing to the realities observed in the locality. Findings reveal that, from the history of land transfers which exposes all the actors involved, to their means of land acquisition, the surface area, and the destination of production, the populations of the municipality of Njombe/Penja are victims of land grabbing.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Land Grabbing, Land Ownership, Indicators, Exploitation, Production, Actors

1. Introduction

The concept of land grabbing is increasingly gaining ground since the financial crisis of 2007-2008 that brought about a real land rush (Nde Fru,

<http://www.icenecdev.org/> [1]; Leumako Nongni, mars 2023 [2]; McLaren, 2014 [3]¹. Though this concept has become very prolific in recent literature on land issues, deserving careful consideration, there seems not to be an agreement among the group of scholars who have investigated it. While civil society and peasant organizations insist on the notion of “land grabbing” (Friis and Reenberg, 2010 [4]), the World Bank speaks of “land acquisitions”, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation places emphasis on “large-scale land transfers” (Friedrich Ebert Fondation, 2012 [5]), the actors of French cooperation on land, on their part, emphasize the notion of “large-scale appropriation” and the International Land Coalition, on her part, insists on the term “commercial pressures on land”. We could add the notion of “large-scale land investments” which some other authors still prefer (Rambinintsaotra, 2010, p. 2 [6]; Lallau, 2012 [7]; Burnod, 2022 [8]). However, the question that arises from the above terminological variations is whether they reflect a conceptual variation in the actual interpretation and content given to the concept under consideration. Differently stated, what is the actual interpretational content of the concept of land grabbing? Is this concept as handled by existing literature relevant in all social contexts?

This paper examines the specific case of the municipality of Njombe/Penja characterised by large farms and considered a victim of land grabbing as a consequence (Pigeau, 2009 [9]; CCFD, 2009 [10]; Transparency International Cameroon, <http://www.ti-cameroon.org/> [11]). It postulates that land grabbing is revealed through a certain number of indicators identifiable in the literature on land. These indicators compared to the reality of the municipality of Njombé-Penja, will enable the conclusion of whether or not there is a situation of land grabbing in this rural environment. The paper is organised as follows: the first section carries a brief presentation of the study area, and focuses on methodological questions highlighting the data collection and data analysis techniques. The second section brings out indicators that can be relied on to clearly identify the situation of land grabbing. Thereafter, the identified indicators are compared with the realities of the municipality of Njombe/Penja to understand whether or not she is a victim of land grabbing.

2. Methods and Tools

Understanding the phenomenon addressed in this study requires the implemen-

¹In the Cameroonian context, we can illustrate with the case of Herakles Farms’ palm oil project in the Southwest Region of Cameroon and the case of the illegal expansions of SOCAPALM in the South Region of the country. Read: Valentine Nde Fru, Land Grabbing: the Case of Herakles Farms in Cameroon, International Centre for Environmental Education and Community Development (ICENECDEV), <http://www.icenecdev.org/>; Jeannette Leumako Nongni, “Expansions foncières illégales de la SOCAPALM et stratégies de résistance des paysans riverains de l’arrondissement de Lokoundjé (Sud-Cameroun), in *Revue Camerounaise de Sociologie (RECSO)*, Vol 1, N° 3, mars 2023, pp. 153-174. In Zambia, there was the case of the expropriation, in 2010, of more than 200 families of coveted land by a foreign investor without any compensation. Read: Daniel Jamie McLaren, 2014, *Transnational Land Acquisitions (TLA): an evaluation of current legal frameworks and global regulatory responses from a human rights perspective*, Research dissertation/paper presented for the approval of Senate in fulfillment of part of the requirements for the MPhil in approved courses and a minor dissertation/research paper.

tation of a certain number of methods and tools relating to the qualitative approach. Hence, in this section, we first and foremost present briefly the municipality of Njombé-Penja before proceeding to highlighting the various methodological aspects.

2.1. The Scope of Study

This research work is carried out in the municipality of Njombé-Penja, situated in the Littoral region of Cameroon, more precisely in the central part of the Mounjo division which constitutes one of the four divisions of the Littoral region (Leumako, 2016 [12]). She is known for her rich and fertile volcanic soil, a warm and rainy climate that is conducive to the development of all types of crops. Her even terrain makes it easy and facilitates the use machinery for agricultural practices. More so, her one hour proximity to the Douala International sea port is an added advantage for the exportation of agricultural produce. The municipality of Njombe/Penja is also rich with a dense and diversified population which explains the reason why she is considered a cosmopolitan zone (Barbier, 1980, p. 14 [13]; Leumako, 2018 [14]). All these factors justify why the area is highly coveted by both national and international investors, who have been moving in over the years.

The municipality of Njombé/Penja proved to be an appropriate site for this study as it highlights the various aspects of land grabbing. It is a context which permits to observe the deep and far off roots of land grabbing. It equally gives a clear picture of the different types of land grabbers and the real beneficiaries of the development of the land grabbed. Furthermore, the municipality of Njombé/Penja permitted the observation of the fate of the local populations who are victims of land grabbing, even if this paper does not place much emphasis on this aspect.

2.2. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was done using a set of methods that allowed the validity of scientific reasoning (Dollo, Lambert, Parayre, 2017 [15]). J.R. Mogba and N. Moukadas (1995, p. 27 [16]) underline that “*they are defined on the basis of rigorous operating procedures, transferable and applicable under various conditions to the phenomena and problems in progress*”. Secondary and primary data were collect using the qualitative approach. Secondary data was collected through documentary analysis. This documentary review permitted the understanding of the notion of land grabbing and the identification of indicators of land grabbing. Concerning primary data, semi-structured interviews were the main collection technique used. Semi-structured interviews are advantageous in that, it gives informants the latitude to freely express themselves in their own words. Investigations were carried out in the municipality of Njombé/Penja in May 2021 with main objective being to determine whether or not the local populations perceive themselves as victims of land grabbing. Within the framework of our research,

this technique allowed the collection of information regarding the opinion, behaviors and attitudes of the actors concerned: the local population of Njombé/Penja, traditional rulers, and government representatives.

To circumscribe the social space of the research, the purposive sampling and the snowball sampling techniques were used. Concerning the purposive sampling, participants to the study were intentionally selected because they have experiences or knowledge relevant to the research topic, and to ensure that key area relevant to the subject matter was covered to permit the collection of relevant data within each key social group in relation to our research objectives. Furthermore, the Divisional Delegation of MINDCAF (Ministry of State Property, Surveys and Land Tenure) and the Divisional Delegation of agriculture of Moungo were purposively selected because they are the key public administrations with regards to our subject matter. The purposive selection of traditional rulers who are key actors to matters pertaining to land distribution was done with the assistance of a field facilitator based in Njombé. Also, the council hall actors (the Secretary General (SG) and the responsible of local development), and large and medium-sized farmers, were chosen using the same process.

As for the snowball sampling technique, it was used as a complementary method to the purposive sampling (Lochmiller, 2018 [17]). It was oriented towards local populations. It permitted the selection of respondents based on referrals from pre-selected respondent who knew other members of the population affected by the problem of land grabbing. Thus, each new interview produces a new orientation in terms of choice of the next respondents.

In total, 29 interviews were conducted: two in the council hall, two with administrative authorities, two with decentralized State services, four with traditional leaders, five with large and medium-sized farmers and 14 with local population.

2.3. Data Analysis Technique

The content analysis method was employed to ensure the interpretation of data collected in the field after survey. Content analysis appears as “*a family of systematic rule-guided techniques used to analyze the informational contents of textual data*” (Jacoby and Siminoff, 2008, p. 39 [18]). This implies that, content analysis permits researchers to highlight objective and systematic procedures for the information contained in a text or in a speech etc. Depelteau (2000, p. 295 [19]) defines it as a coding or classification technique aiming to discover in a rigorous and objective way the meaning of a message. This method is important as it allows the analysis of both primary and secondary data; makes possible the processing of empirical data and the thoughts of different authors who have addressed the subject matter under study. The data collected was classified into two categories: the indicators of land grabbing and the history of land transfers on the one hand and, the position of this locality in relation to these indicators on the other hand.

3. Presentation of Results

This part is organized around the following two main axes: the identification of indicators of land grabbing and, the comparison of these indicators with the evidence of the facts in the municipality of Njombé/Penja. It goes ahead to examine whether or not the municipality is victim of land grabbing.

3.1. Indicators of Land Grabbing

Here, we define briefly the notion of land grabbing. Thereafter, we focus on elements which according to existing and explored literatures can make it possible to conclude that there is a situation of land grab.

3.1.1. Definition of the Concept of Land Grabbing

The concept of land grabbing can be traced as far back as colonization of Africa. René Dumont (1962 [20]), Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch (1982 [21]) and Jean-Marc Ela (1982 [22]) support that, by instituting in the legislation the concept of “vacant land and without owner”², colonial masters would have legitimized land grabbing in Africa. Having its origin from the Australian Torrens Act, the concept of land vacancy stipulates that the actual recognition of ownership with regard to land property is dependent on the principle of effective occupancy. The presence of such a clause in the legislation facilitated the unscrupulous abuse of African territories by colonists, and specially enabled them to put in place a policy of large land concessions. Consequently, it deprived the native indigenous people of their customary rights to their own land. Coquery-Vidrovitch (1982, p. 75 [21]) restates the resulting situation as follows: “*the policy of huge European concessions was (then) generalized, leading to a blind despoilment which was even more dangerous given that there was no legislation regarding which land plot could be considered as specifically reserved to the native indigenous people of Africa*”³. Julian F Quan (1997, p. 24 [23]) adds, saying that “*the continuing allocation of private land concessions creates yet more confusion and potential for conflict*” in Africa.

It follows that the policy put in place with regards to land ownership led the colonists to plunder the African people of their lands, the latter being transformed into huge farms for the exclusive benefit of colonial masters.

Curiously, the process of land plundering which is not beneficial to Africans continues even after independence as the result of the extension of the clause regarding vacant land to the land law of the still fragile African states. Land plundering in most African countries according to Jean-Marc Ela (1982, 96) [22] is demonstrated through the creation of a “national land property” belonging to the State in the law legislating African territories. Hence, the State is deemed “the overall owner” (*ibid.*, 97) of national land made up of “uncultivated plots”. It is worth noting to mention that according to customary land law, these plots deemed uncultivated by the post-colonial State rightfully belong to native com-

²“Terres vacantes et sans maître”.

³Our translation.

munities. These native communities are therefore simply dispossessed of their property to the benefit of national elites who are financially powerful (Quan, 1997, p. 4) [23]. Consequently, communities may end up in “a situation where a member of a lineage may find himself without a piece of land in his own village” (Ela, 1982, p. 97) [22]⁴. The above analysis demonstrates the phenomenon of land grabbing from colonial era that continues to the post-colonial system and became more acute in 2007/2008 as a result of the financial crisis. It is within this perspective that Valentine Nde Fru (<http://www.icenecdev.org/>) affirms that, “*while used broadly throughout history, land grabbing as used today primarily refers to large scale land acquisitions following especially the 2007 to 2008 world food price upsurge*”. But what is land grabbing all about with regard to our content?

In simple terms, land grabbing is understood as any dispossession of land from small local producers to the benefit of large investors. Alison Graham, Sylvain Aubry and al. (2009, p. 17 [24]) assert in this line that, “*the most common definition of the global land grab refers to large scale land acquisition—be it purchase or lease—for agricultural production by foreign investors*”. This involves an illegitimate seizure of land, leading to the expulsion of one or more local producers (Transnational Institute, 2013 [25]). Land grabbing also appears explicitly as a process of non-local control of land for the sake of food production to the benefit of people residing far away from production plots (Grain, 2008 [26]; Graham, Aubry *et al.*, 2009). It also implies, and very often, that this control is exercised over vast areas of arable land which exceed certain thresholds and tend towards concentration (Chouquer, 2012 [27]; Odusola, 2014 [28]; Batterbury and Ndi, 2018 [29]). Large areas of land, whose sizes are disproportionate to local land ownership, are increasingly concentrated in the hands of large investors for agricultural export (Meigno Bokagne, Awono, Ondoua, 2011 [30]). Most of those involved in land grabbing are foreign investors who can either be individuals or public, Para public or private enterprises. (Burnod, 2022 [8]; Chouquer, 2012 [27]; Ayodele F. Odusola, 2014 [28]). These investors acquire large scale land in foreign countries with the help of their State, for exploitation totally different from the mode of local exploitation. The acquisition of such land is done with the complicity of host governments who express the need to receive other investors who can accelerate growth (Burnod, 2022 [8]; Chouquer, 2012 [27]; Batterbury and Ndi, 2018 [29]). Actors involved in the phenomenon of land grabbing are also nationals who are sometimes involved in the running of the country. That’s why Christian Lund, Rie Odgaard and Espen Sjaastad (2006, p. 4 [31]) argue that the phenomenon is “*often undertaken by the economically most powerful groups, including government officials and politicians.*”

The phenomenon of large scale land control is not without serious consequences especially for victimized communities. Among these negative consequences, we note the loss of access to land by most local farmers and local com-

⁴Our translation.

munities, the unsatisfactory local food needs, recurrent tensions between investors and local populations, etc. (Cotula, Vermeulen, Leonard, and Keeley, 2009, p. 15 [32]; Leumako Nongni, December 2023 [33]).

3.1.2. Some Indicators of Land Grabbing

Land grabbing is a problematic concept. This is specifically so in cases where there appear not to be an agreement between the original owner of the land and the purchasing party. However, land grabbing as a notion has become so common that, it is used whenever protests from local communities are staged against foreign investors, be it international or national. To this regard, it is necessary to bring out indicators emerging from literatures we explored that can be used to pin down land grabbing in an unmistakable way. Thus, within this framework, our analyses outline the following four indicators notably: the size of the farm estate, means of land acquisition, actors involved in the process of land grabbing, and the destination of crop production.

- **Size of the farm estate**

A consensus that emerges from the review of existing literatures is one according to which the use of the concept of *land grabbing* is motivated by the outstanding size of the farm estate at stake. Where, the farmland under consideration spreads over huge surface area and thus displays a striking contrast with local farms with respect to proportion (Burnod, 2022 [8]; Grain, 2008 [26]; Jorand et Manganello, 2012 [34]). As such, land grabbing involves a gain of control over large land (via purchase, borrowing, occupation...) whether the said control is legal or not.

- **Means of land acquisition**

The second reason that motivates the use of the label of *land grabbing* is connected to the means of land acquisition of the farm land at stake. These farm lands are, in most cases acquired through abusive methods that are obtained without the consent of the local population owning the land (Quan, 1997 [23]; Meigno Bokagne, Awono and Ondoua, 2011 [30]). It is sometimes easy to witness situations of threats and pressures on the owners of the land who detain an official title deed. Furthermore, situations of land grabbing are experienced when the government⁵ spitefully violates or goes against the rights of the original owner in favour of the purchaser. Land grabbing may therefore be summarized as the sum of transactions devoid of the enlightened and willing consent or approval of the original owner of the land (Transnational Institute, 2013) [25].

- **Actors involved in land grabbing**

Those involved in the acquisition and exploitation of large scale land are in most cases foreign investors. However, there are more and more nationals joining their rank today, including important members of government, as well as local and foreign elites who detain the financial strength needed to mount and maintain pressure (Ela, 1982 [22]; Meigno Bokagne, Awono and Ondoua, 2011

⁵Land appropriation procedures in Cameroon reveal a duality of legal standards governing the land issue. See Circular Letters No. 0001 and 0002/MINDCAF/CAB/LC of February 9, 2024.

[30]). Unfortunately, members of the local community seem to be excluded from this rank.

- **Destination of crop production**

Curiously, crops produced on grabbed lands are not usually destined to be consumed or meet the food needs of the local community. More often than not, it is destined for trade on western markets (Graham, Aubry *et al.*, 2009 [24]; Grain, 2008 [26]). This signifies that, produce from these large farms is intended to feed other group of people to the detriment of the local population. “*Local human needs*” are no longer necessarily important determinants of land use decisions “*as was the case in many land use systems*” (Friis and Reenberg, 2010, p. 2) [4]. As such, local populations are kept in persistent poverty and famine due to the loss of arable land.

The above examination of the characteristics of indicators pointing to cases of land grabbing may now be used to evaluate the situation of land grabbing in relation to our area of study-Njombe/Penja.

3.2. An Evaluation of the Locality of Njombe/Penja through Land Grabbing Indicators

Located in the heart of the Mungo division, the locality of Njombe/Penja is an agricultural area of proven fertility. Besides, the conducive climatic condition of the locality favours the production of all types of crops. This explains why the area is increasingly being occupied by large farms spread over the fertile and accessible land to the detriment of the local population. These farms are mainly specialized in the production of bananas and flowers meant principally for exportation. From this perspective, the local population of the locality of Njombe/Penja could be considered victims of land grabbing. Yet, it is more reasonable for such a claim to result from a methodical description of the facts inducing such a conclusion. In this light, we succinctly review the history of land transfers in this locality in section 2.1 before providing an answer to the question of whether the population of this locality has been subjected to land grabbing.

3.2.1. Historical Review of Land Transfers in the Municipality of Njombe/Penja

There are two historical periods to take into consideration while evaluating the development of land transfers in the municipality of Njombe/Penja, namely, the colonial and the post-colonial periods.

- **The colonial period**

Originally considered a remote area, the Moungo area became an object of attraction as a result of the Douala-Nkongsamba railway construction. Although the Germans who were the colonial masters of the land manifested a keen interest for the region, their interest would be short-lived due to the end of the railway construction which occurred simultaneously with the end of German colonization of Cameroon. After the departure of the Germans, the French took over with the exploration of the Moungo area acquiring huge surface of land for their

operators. Barbier & Al. (1983 [35]) have identified many concessions in Loum subdivision of which the locality of Njombe/Penja was then a part. With respect to this, they made an inventory of the existence of up to 21 big farms spread over an acreage of 8844 ha in the wake of independence in 1959. This includes the SPNP of Njombe which alone spreads over 4729 ha, Nassif at Loum-chantier, and the catholic mission of Penja with 63 ha (Barbier & Al., 1983, p. 73) [35].

Out of the 21 farms, the biggest, namely the SPNP, is located in the locality of Njombe/Penja. In addition to SPNP, there is the SCDP-CAPLAIN created in 1930 by a French national Mr. Caplain covering 250 ha initially used for the production of banana throughout the colonial period. Moreover, the catholic mission in the locality of Njombé/Penja also grabbed some concessions around Penja covering 63 ha⁶. It should be noted that, land grabbing was the norm according to the logic of the colonial period, given that these lands were abusively taken away from the local population without their approval, and often with a lot of violence⁷. Interestingly, these grabbed lands which was used for capitalistic production was not chosen at randomly. To render the outflow of production smoother, the colonial master chose lands that were closer to the road and railway lines. As a result, the population was forced to move backward to the hinterlands reduced to carrying out subsistence farming. This situation is also observed by Julian Quan (1997, p. 4) [23] in Southern Africa and described as follows: “*the best lands have generally been monopolized by the commercial sector*”, thus rural populations were concentrated “*on poorer, more marginal lands*”.

- **The post-colonial period**

The sub-division of Njombé/Penja is very suitable for the production of banana. It is often referred to as a “banana plain” as many big banana farms can be seen in the locality since the colonial era. These farms are promoted by French farmers who had received vast hectares of land from colonial authorities.

About three decades ago, in order to avoid severe competition in the sector of banana, the SCDP-Caplain which initially focused on the production of banana on 250 ha, had to diversify its production. They now produce flowers, greenery and decorative fruits for exportation.

SPNP on its part used the large farm obtained from colonial authorities to produce banana on 4729 ha of land. However, compelled in 1987 by the desire to return to his home country, the owner sold the farm to a subsidiary of the fruit company of Marseille (Compagnie fruitière de Marseille). The latter arrived and settled in Moungo to carry out Banana production on 44 ha of land obtained through a long lease from the post-colonial government. This led to the emer-

⁶A conflict persists to this day between the Catholic mission of Penja and the populations of the Mpoula village. The latter claim to have been victims of the Catholic mission’s ruse to be stripped of their land (Interview conducted with the populations of Mpoula village).

⁷During an interview with the traditional chief of the Bonandam village, the latter asserted that the previous chief was imprisoned because he refused to sign papers which obliged him to grant the village’s land to the PHP. Finally, he gave in to regain his freedom, which explains the reason why the village is invaded today by banana plantations.

gence of what is known as PHP-SPNP group.

Apart from these colonial companies producing banana, the Cameroonian government in 1964 created the “Organisation Camerounaise de la Banane (OCB)”. The organization aimed at encouraging small farmers to produce banana as well as supervise the process. These small producers who owned small pieces of land were either indigenes or non-natives who acquired their lands from the native population. Unfortunately, these small producers were obliged to abandon their farms due to the collapse of OCB towards the end of the 80s. From the ashes of OCB emerged the Banana Society of Mbome (SBM). A branch of this structure is located in Tiko, and occupies the land formerly owned by OCB which in fact belongs to small farmers. These plots are however given to SBM by the government with the former being liable to pay an allowance to small farmers who are the original owners of the land. The said allowance is determined by the State and amounts to cfa 60,000 francs⁸ per year and per hectare (ha)⁹. With time, the SBM and the PHP-SPNP group formed an alliance in order to withstand rising competition encounter by the Cameroonian Banana on international market. From this alliance emerged the agro-industrial complex PHP-SPNP-SBM in 1991.

Following this, these three companies now named PHP became the property of the Fruits Company of Marseille in 2003, with PHP continuing its expansion by acquiring large hectares of land from the local population. The latter, who give away their land either willingly or as the result of severe pressure, are found in the locality of Njombe/Penja and Manjo through Loum. With this, PHP was able to acquire up to 6000 ha of arable land. Contrarily to PHP, la Société des Plantations de Mbanga (SPM) or the *Mbanga Plantation Company* which has also been exploiting land in the locality of Njombé/Penja for the production of banana, proceeded by direct negotiations with the local population to obtain their lands. Moreover, SPM has been paying the sum of CFA 150,000 francs¹⁰ /ha/per year to these populations as compensation.

Apart from these big farmers growing banana, the locality of Njombé/Penja also has some few nationals specialized in the production of white pepper and palms. For example, la Société Camerounaise des Bananeraies et Palmeraies du Penja (SCBPP) owned by Mr. Tiani Joseph is one of those producers of banana that has stood the test of time for more than 10 years after the closing of OCB. Today known as “Tiani /Onguene & Sons”, the company grows palms and white pepper on about 200 ha¹¹ of land. Furthermore, we also have “Afdi” owned by Mr. Metomo who is one of the highest producers of white pepper on 70 ha of land in the Moungo. Both Metomo and Tiani/Onguene & Sons are based in Penja. While the later acquired his land directly from the local population by paying the fee required by the population, the former acquired his through suc-

⁸About 98 dollars.

⁹Interview conducted with the divisional officer of Njombé/Penja and the local population.

¹⁰About 245 dollars.

¹¹Interview carried out with the director of the plantation.

cession. His father would have used his social position as an influential civil servant of the Cameroonian administration in Moungo for many years to obtain these parcels of land¹².

In addition, we have Mr. Michel Foyet, owner of a 50 ha of palm farm located in Njombe¹³ known as “Agricola”. During an interview with him, he admitted to have obtained this land by felling an inaccessible forest, and in return, compensated the population owning the land as by the customary law of the people¹⁴. But the traditional ruler of Bonadam village expressed discontent on this by arguing that “*the non-natives, who are more dynamic than the indigenous populations, go into the hinterland to make plantations, they enter the forests, cut them down and settle on the lands of the indigenous people without asking their opinion. Then they claim to have compensated us*”¹⁵. In a nutshell, it is important to retain that, even though the produce from these farms are sold on urban markets within the country, they are first and foremost destined for exportation.

The above overview permits us to have a better perception concerning the major farms located in the locality of Njombe/Penja. It also allows us to understand the specific details on their acreage, means of land acquisition, actors involved, types of crops grown in the area, and the destination of the crops produced. The question that arises given the present perception of the situation at stake is whether one can rightfully refer to the municipality of Njombé/Penja as victim of land grabbing.

3.2.2. The Municipality of Njombé/Penja: Victim of Land Grabbing?

After presenting the history of land transfers and agricultural exploitation in the municipality of Njombe/Penja, it is essential to summarise the situation on the basis of the four indicators of land grabbing presented above: the size of the farms, means of land acquisition, actors involved and destination of production.

An examination of the area farmed by both expatriates and nationals, compared with the area farmed by the local population, exposes an outstanding disparity. Most plantations own by members of the local community vary between 01 and 05 ha¹⁶, revealing a disproportion with farms owned by expatriates and nationals varying from 50 to around 6000 ha¹⁷.

Secondly, an analysis of the means of land acquisition discloses that most French plantations are concessions that were granted without the consent of the local population during colonial period (SCDP-CAPLAIN, SPNP...). More so, not only was the land of OCB granted by the State to SPM done without the

¹²Interview conducted with Mr. Metomo.

¹³Interview carried out in Njombé.

¹⁴Here, the compensation in question is a feast offered to the village concerned and gifts to the chief. (Interview conducted with the owner of the agro-industry).

¹⁵Interview carried out with the traditional ruler of the Bonadam village.

¹⁶Information obtained during our interview with the divisional delegate of agriculture of Njombe/Penja and with the local population.

¹⁷Information obtained during our interview with major producers, both national and international, and the divisional delegate of agriculture.

consent of the farmers, but the compensation paid to them was also a unilateral decision by the State¹⁸.

PHP on its part occupies land in the national domain under a long lease. But where does land of national domain come from? From the State's decision to make all land without land title (even if the individual has customary rights over the land) or land without effective occupation, the National lands managed exclusively by the State (Ordinance N°74/1 of 06 July 1974, to establish rules governing land tenure, Articles 14 to 17). More so, the extension of PHP's land ownership is perceived as a source of many conflicts in the locality of Njombe/Penja which is translated through the many land conflicts cases handled in the court of first instance of the country (Transparency International, 2013, pp. 33-37) [17]. This extension is equally a source of impoverishment, degradation of the environment and threat to the health condition of local populations (Leumako, 2016) [12]. As far as land acquired by national elites is concerned, we can question the way plantations like *Agricola* acquired its parcel of land after claiming to have felled an inaccessible forest. Similarly, the means employed by the owner of *Afidi* plantation to acquire the land he inherited from his father may also be subjected to questioning: which means did his father—a senior civil servant—employed to own all the land he bequeathed to his offspring?

Consequently, we note that land grabbers are not only expatriates but are also nationals often referred by the local population as “allogènes” (non-natives) because they come from elsewhere to buy and exploit their rich and fertile land. Moreover, all crops grown in these farms by expatriates are mostly destined for exportation on the world markets in order to respond to the needs of the western world. As concerns nationals, they confirmed the fact that a greater portion of their production (particularly white pepper) is exported, but part is sold on urban markets within the country. Thus, this reveals an agricultural export which the local populations, initial owners of the land do not benefit.

From these four indicators: the size of the farms, means of land acquisition, actors involved and destination of production, it would be very difficult and maybe impossible not to think of a situation of land grabbing in the municipality of Njombe/Penja.

A question naturally arises from our findings: what is the fate of the population of the municipality of Njombé/Penja victim of land grabbing?

Deprived of space to grow the food they need, the populations of this municipality face hunger and malnutrition. Whereas, before the arrival of the big agro-industrial companies, they were able to meet local food demand and contribute to national economy through agricultural surpluses. Faced with the necessity to meet their own needs, these populations are now forced to go seeking for the most marginal lands, far from the usual communication routes. And as a result of the poor state of these farm-to-market roads, they continually incur

¹⁸These information were obtained from the local population, divisional delegate of agriculture of Moungo, subdivisional delegate of agriculture of Njombe/Penja, administrative authorities, and managers of PHP.

losses due to the difficulty they encounter to sell their produce (Bichat, 2012 [36]). Thus, the retreat to far-off lands which are inaccessible, to carry out farming whose benefits are imperceptible, only increases the impoverished situation of these populations (Ela, 1994 [37]).

Alongside this impoverishment is the proletarianization of the local population who are obliged to become cheap laborers for the agro-industries established in the municipality. However, their low wages and precarious working conditions do not permit them to meet their basic needs. Consequently, this leads to an undernourished population, unable to afford appropriate health care. More so, their children are unable to go to school or are under-educated, with their surest fate being to join their proletarianized parents in the private plantations established on their land, as is the case for most of them already (Leumako Nongni, 2016) [12].

In all, land grab has contributed to impoverish and proletarianize the local population of the municipality of Njombe/Penja.

4. Conclusions

Land grabbing is a reality in most rural societies in Africa. These societies are generally considered victims of land grabbing due to the presence of investors who exploit large hectares of land. This article whose area of study is the municipality of Njombe/Penja is based on the argument that situations of land grabbing can be identified through a certain number of indicators that are noticeable in the literature on land question. Secondary data collection permitted us to identify several of these indicators. Primary data collected using a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews enabled the comparison of these indicators with the facts of Njombe/Penja municipality.

Findings were presented in two major points. First and foremost, we defined the notion of land grabbing from its origin to the content given to it by the authors who have studied the issue. From this definition, some indicators that reveal land grabbing in a specific situation were clearly exposed and presented. Thereafter, we presented the history of land transfers and the different actors involved in the exploitation of land in the municipality of Njombe/Penja. And lastly, indicators were presented and compared to facts observed in the municipality. These indicators are the size of the farms present in the locality, means of land acquisition by farmers, actors involved in land grabbing and destination of production. The analysis of these four variables led us to the conclusion that the populations of the municipality of Njombe/Penja are victims of land grabbing.

If land grabbing remains a reality in most rural milieus in Africa and Cameroon in particular, it is because the situation is linked to the fact that access to land ownership by rural communities appears to be a peripheral question. It is therefore important to question the national procedure of land regulation which could be beneficial to all stakeholders, and to farmers in rural communities in particular, whose impoverishment is certain with the multiplication of cases of

land grabbing. With this in mind, the recent circulars by the Minister of State Property, Surveys and Land Tenure should be a subject of attention¹⁹. It is essential to understand from the perspective of sociology of law, the implications of facilitating rural communities' access to land security, and limiting the phenomenon of land grabbing. Such reflection could constitute the subject of future research on the issue of land grabbing in rural areas.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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¹⁹Circular Letter N° 0001/MINDCAF/CAB/LC of 09 February 2024, to codify the involvement of Chiefs of traditional Command Unit in the procedures for the direct registration of occupied and/or exploited areas of national domain in view to prevent and/or facilitate the settlement of land disputes.

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