

working paper



6<sup>th</sup> International  
Conference of the  
BRICS Initiative for  
Critical Agrarian  
Studies

## Land Deals, Labour and Everyday Politics

**ADWOA YEBOAH GYAPONG**

(November, 2018)



Land Deals, Labour and Everyday Politics by Adwoa Yeboah Gyapong, International Institute of Social Studies

*Published by:* BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS)

*in collaboration with:*

Universidade de Brasília - UnB

Brasília, Brazil

*Website:* <http://www.unb.br/>

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Porto Alegre, Brazil

*Website:* [www.ufrgs.br/](http://www.ufrgs.br/)

Universidade Estadual Paulista - UNESP

São Paulo, Brazil

*Website:* [www.unesp.br](http://www.unesp.br)

College of Humanities and Development Studies

China Agricultural University, Beijing, China

*E-mail:* [yejz@cau.edu.cn](mailto:yejz@cau.edu.cn)

*Website:* <http://cohd.cau.edu.cn/>

Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS)

University of the Western Cape

Cape Town, South Africa

*E-mail:* [info@plaas.org.za](mailto:info@plaas.org.za) *Website:*

[www.plaas.org.za](http://www.plaas.org.za)

International Institute of Social Studies

The Hague, The Netherlands

*E-mail:* [information@iss.nl](mailto:information@iss.nl)

*Website:*

[www.iss.nl](http://www.iss.nl)

Future Agricultures Consortium

Institute of Development Studies, University

of Sussex, England

*E-mail:* [info@future-agricultures.org](mailto:info@future-agricultures.org)

*Website:* <http://www.future-agricultures.org/>

The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration

- RANEPА

Moscow, Russian Federation

*E-mail:* [information@ranepa.ru](mailto:information@ranepa.ru)

*Website:*

[www.ranepa.ru](http://www.ranepa.ru)

Transnational Institute

The Netherlands

*E-mail:* [tni@tni.org](mailto:tni@tni.org)

*Website:* [www.tni.org](http://www.tni.org)

Terra de Direitos

Curitiba, Brazil

*E-mail:*

[terradedireitos@terradedireitos.org.br](mailto:terradedireitos@terradedireitos.org.br)

*Website:* [terradedireitos.org.br](http://terradedireitos.org.br)

©Brasília, UnB, November/2018 All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher and the author.

## **Abstract**

This study presents empirical evidence on the nature of the political struggles for inclusion on an oil palm land deal in Ghana. It examines the employment dynamics and the every politics of workers on an oil palm plantation in a predominantly migrant and settler society of the north-eastern part of Ghana, where large-scale production has only been introduced within the past decade. It shows that by the nature of labour organisation, as well as other structural issues, workers do not benefit equally from the land deals and therefore express everyday forms of resistance against exploitation, and for better terms of incorporation. Particularly, they express agency through absenteeism and non-compliance, which especially, enables them to maintain their basic food sovereignty/security. Nonetheless, these everyday politics is not necessarily liberating in confronting the everyday peasant problems and unfavourable agrarian transitions associated with capitalist agriculture. Overall, this paper contributes to the land grab literature by providing context specific dynamics of impacts and politics and how are they are shaped by a multiplicity of factors- beyond class.

## **Keywords**

Land deal, land grab, oil palm, plantation, Labour, farm workers, everyday politics

## **I. Introduction**

It has been a decade since the global land rush caught the world's attention through media, civil society, academia and policy engagement with the phenomenon. Debates have advanced towards a consensus on the multiplicity and a convergence of issues- the global demand for food, energy and commodities, globalized transport and communication technologies, speculation, internal crises within capitalism etc. all of which are crucial for the current neoliberal paradigm (Amanor, 2012; McMichael, 2012). Currently, as 'successful' land deals are in different stages of implementation, the question of impact remains pertinent. Central to the debates on impacts has been how land deals influence the social relations of agrarian change, the political reactions from below, and the implications of these for development.

In places where there is a strong presence of civil society organisations especially social movements and development NGOs, campaigns to regulate in order to mitigate adverse impacts and maximize opportunities, or to stop and rollback land deals have not only gained wide popularity but also impacted the outcomes of various land deals (Borras et al, 2013). Nonetheless, recent studies have shown that the assumption of inevitable rural resistances against land deals may be too simplistic. As the impacts are differentiated for social groups and classes, so does the political reactions from below (Hall, et al., 2015). There have been accounts of adaptation and co-existence in post-soviet Russia (Mamonova, 2015), both resistance and struggles for incorporation in Africa (Larder, 2015; Martiniello, 2015; Sulle, 2016), and the largely well-known overt resistances from both workers, dispossessed farmers and indigenous communities in many parts of Southern America (Massicotte, 2010; Welch and Sauer, 2015).

Certainly, the historical, political, economic and social contexts within which land deals take place are vital to shaping the political reactions from below. Ghana for instance has undergone about three major waves of large-scale agricultural commercialization since the late nineteenth century. Historically, Ghana's (and many other West African Countries) agricultural production system has been fashioned around family farming and small-scale peasant practices aimed at simple reproduction (Amanor, 1999). While market exchanges have always existed even in pre-colonial periods, the extractive tendencies of colonial policies directed efforts to expand capital into rural areas- through the introduction of export crop plantations and the development of commercial farming systems. Upon independence, the country had inherited an economy dependent on food crop exports yet without the expected trickle-down benefits to the local people's food security. As such, successive governments, right from the 'socialist-

developmentalist' policy inclinations of the 1960s, to those informed by a liberal/neoliberal development paradigm which had influenced global political economy from the late 1970s till date, have sought to promote food self-sufficiency and rural development through a transformation of the existing production systems. Even though policies have not sought to replace completely the peasant system, over the years, they have approached small-scale schemes as that which needs to be integrated into the 'more efficient' and 'competitive' value chains of commercial systems<sup>1</sup>. Through the actions (e.g. market-led land policies) and inactions (e.g. poor implementation of labour regulations) of the state, an enabling environment is created for foreign and private investments in agribusinesses under the rhetoric of efficiency, productivity and employment (Amanor, 2010). Many a time, these ideas also resonate with the legitimating imperatives of traditional land institutions<sup>2</sup> (Boamah, 2014). Also, cash strapped rural folks who maintain both an economic and cultural attachment to land are often caught in a complex web of trade-offs. Under this context, in addition to the fact that there is not a strong base of rural social movements, land deals are often received as a continuum between acquiescence and outright resistance yet often times inclined towards the latter.

If the people are not openly opposing land deals (for reasons above), how do they perceive and express incorporation and to what effect? This study focused on the labour on an oil palm plantation land deal in the Volta Region of Ghana, looking particularly into how they have been incorporated, the how and why of their political reactions, and the implications of their political struggles for agrarian transitions and rural development as a whole. The study uses mixed methods for data collection and is guided by a gendered agrarian political economy approach with a focus on class, identity and the everyday politics of marginalised groups who engage with neoliberal development.

### **Capital Accumulation, Rural Class Differentiation and Adverse Incorporation**

Historically, the African (Sub Saharan) agricultural system has been characterised by family farms, small scale or peasant mode of production. Farming has been built on a resource base -land, seeds, livestock, fisheries, water, family labour,

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, the four largest oil palm estates in Ghana were established under the state's compulsory land acquisition laws and supported by international powers to expropriate peasants lands under in the name of boosting local production.

<sup>2</sup> Recent land transactions however often involve chiefs, families, and individuals, while the state plays a secondary role. Traditional institutions govern about eighty percent of land in Ghana.

local knowledge and skills, social networks and traditions that were fundamentally uncommodified, and oriented towards survival and subsistence (Amanor, 1999; Toulmin & Gueye, 2003). However, over the years, this mode production has been affected by the wider political economy which is reflected in the ways in rural people's access to land have been changing vis-à-vis their integration into the global economy. Although the 'peasantry' persists, it has also been evolving as a group that is differentiated in their social relations of production. Marxists traditions of agrarian political economy suggest that the penetration of capital into rural peasant societies is the main driving force for differentiation. The forceful appropriation of land and the expansion of commodity relations either through primitive accumulation or expanded reproduction (Lenin, 1964; Marx, 1977; Harvey, 2003) separates peasants from their means of production and creates a polarizing rural economy. This is the starting point of differentiation and it is characterized by an accumulating class who control land and labour, and an exploited working class or proletariat divorced from their land and compelled to subsist through wage labour. Historically, this has been seen as an agrarian question of capital that ought to be resolved. That is a question of "whether, and how, capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionising it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones" (Kautsky, 1899). Byres interpreted the agrarian question as that which shows a continuous existence of obstacles to unleashing accumulation in the countryside and capitalist industrialization. Following Byres, and after years of researching this puzzle, Bernstein posits that the classic agrarian question was an 'agrarian question of capital' centred around three problematics- accumulation-, production and politics. Capitalism thus blocks the possibility of achieving an egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life, thereby placing rural agrarian societies into differentiated class relations.

The classic agrarian question of capital also translates into an agrarian question of labour- one that not confined to a single class of dispossessed proletariat but as a continuum to different classes of labour including semi proletariat who now depend directly and indirectly on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction as well those who alternate between small wage work and small-scale petty commodity (Lerche, 2010; Bernstein 2007). Premising a land grab study on the principle that class differentiation is manifested in uneven, concrete and context-specific forms of change, provides a strong methodological foundation that highlights important specificities of affected rural classes.

Over the years, scholarship in agrarian political economy continues to highlight the complexities of the nature of capitalist development that may or not conform

to these teleological patterns. In his study on the shortcomings of classic agrarian political economy theories of rural differentiation- mainly Marxists interpretations, White, (1989) highlighted the need for dynamic and adaptable frameworks that approach social differentiation from a contextualised and relational viewpoint. Similarly, Oya, (2004) even notes that the application of class in the rural African context may even defy objectivity and in rural places like Ghana, for instance, a prominent basis of differentiation is 'strangerhood' rather than class, whilst elsewhere in Ethiopia, state policies of land distribution has made class a less significant, if not a non-existent means of differentiation (Moreda, 2016). To better understand rural agrarian structures and transformations in the era of a global land rush, other demographic and identity-related forms of differentiation (gender, age, ethnicity, religion, social status etc.) is necessary. A gendered analysis of the implications of land deals on wage labour relations looks into the to the role of gendered domestic relations of access to and control over resources structuring labour markets (Razavi, 2002). Here not only into how domestic and formal institutions and power relations (dis)empower marginalised groups under different labour management schemes (Behrman et al., 2012; Harriss-White, 2003). But under varying social conditions, both class and identity relations revert backwards and forwards suggesting the need to view class-gender analysis through a relational and an interactive lens (da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; Schiavoni, 2016).

As land deals continue to take hold in many places<sup>3</sup>, and in the light of recent debates around neoliberalism and the effects of capitalist expansion on poverty reduction, a major line of argument remains that there is a good potential of 'win-win' possibilities (UNCTAD, 2010; World Bank 2008). In the early days of the land grab phenomenon alongside the debates around the 2008 World Bank Report, a central narrative that emerged among mainstream lines but also along some critical views, was that exclusion (of the displaced and affected communities in general) is a major blockade to the poverty reducing potentials of agricultural investments (World Bank 2010). Li, (2011, p. 282) not confident in the developmental potentials of such land investments, strongly argues that 'unless vast numbers of jobs are created, or a global basic income grant is devised to redistribute the wealth generated in highly productive but labour-displacing ventures, any program that robs rural people of their foothold on the land must be firmly rejected'. Critics from political economy and poverty studies have thus advanced the concept of Adverse or differential incorporation as a critique of the oversimplified accounts of inclusion and exclusion in market and capitalist

---

<sup>3</sup>, with the recognition of the several failed deals too

oriented development projects. Here, the question goes beyond the either/or of inclusion and exclusion to their complex interactions and their underlying conditions (du Toit & Hickey, 2007). Within the framework of adverse incorporation and especially in relation to the labour question of this study, inclusion through wage labour is automatically perceived as an escape from poverty. Of course, mainstream ideas are also not blind to the risks and challenges involved in inclusion and exclusion. This is reflected in the recent efforts being put in place to ensure good governance through regulations, standards and transparent institutions. These regulatory approaches however beg the question of underlying the social and political structures within which they emerge. As a framework for assessing the impacts of land deals, the multiple lenses of class, gender and adverse incorporation guide an exploration into the diverse ways in which particular rural classes, groups, and individuals are incorporated not only into land investments but also the 'larger social totalities - institutions, markets, political systems, social networks that drives differential consequences; and enable and/or constrain their agency and politics what (Du Toit, 2008, p. 1).

### **Political Struggles and Resistances: Every Day Politics as Weapons of the Weak?**

Locating peasants political reactions within the context of contemporary global land grabs presents peasants politics on two broad fronts. One the one hand is the struggles (by the previously landed) against eviction and dispossession in the defence of the commons. Indeed this has been this has been the commonest assumption and underlying principles underlying anti-land grab advocacies and movements. On the other hand is the class struggles of labour over terms of incorporation or against exploitation. Broadly, neoclassical/new institutional economics and agrarian political economy perspectives provide different theoretical explanations to the trigger or not of peasant<sup>4</sup> resistances vis-à-vis the development of capitalist agriculture and the spread of commodity relations in rural peasant societies.

Mainstream perspectives from neoclassical and new institutional economics are premised on the methodological assumption that peasants are rational and often times make decisions upon calculating the benefits and risks of engaging in collective action (Deininger, 1999; Lipton, 2006). According to Popkin, (1980), this explains why landless labourers may not necessarily act first even though he describes them as the most politically conscious groups. He argued that even when there are political reactions, it is often based on incentives, and/or directed

---

<sup>4</sup> Peasants as used in this context, and throughout this paper refers broadly to agrarian working people including subsistent peasants, small scale farmers and farmworkers

towards new opportunities which aim at taming markets and bureaucrats rather than restoring 'traditional systems'.

Unlike mainstream accounts that places confidence in individual rationality and institutions, classic ideologies from agrarian political perspectives on the hand examines politics as a function of social structures. The two main strands of agrarian political economy- Marxist and moral economy perspectives, however, shows variance in their approach to the explanation of peasant politics. Marxist political economy perspectives see politics from different viewpoints about class action, yet generally not very optimistic about peasants ability to organise resistances due to the exploitative and controlling nature of dominant classes and state institutions but also their lack of class consciousness (Duggett, 1975; Marx, 1977; Lenin, 1982). Even when peasants exhibit consciousness, they often focus on economic bargaining rather than demanding radical political changes (Paige, (1975).

Moral economy perspectives, on the hand, which like Marxists interpretations also follows the logic of differentiation and exploitation, however perceive this from a binary interpretation of class- whereby the policies and activities emanating from ruling elite classes threatens the subsistence of peasants (a single marginalised class) or that which unfavourably transforms their mode of (re) production (Thorner, 1966; Shanin, 1974). Although peasants may be constrained to organise, their everyday ways of life express agency against the actions of ruling elites that threaten their means of subsistence. Their daily reactions of resistance, Scott, (1985) referred as 'everyday politics'. Everyday politics involves little or no organisation to embrace, comply with, adjust, and contest norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources. As shown by Scott, (1985) in his study peasant resistances in South East Asia, everyday politics is often unplanned, uncoordinated, and those involved 'typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms'. Many a time, it is usually low profile and private behaviour of the people and often entwined with individuals and small groups' activities in their struggles to sustain their daily livelihoods whilst interacting with others like themselves, with superiors and with subordinates (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 232). While some have critiqued the overestimation of the political significance of such everyday resistances, (See Gupta (2001), in contexts such as rural Ghana where political mobilizations against land deals rarely occur, everyday politics remain a useful way of framing their politics. In an earlier study on a post-independence state-led oil palm land grab, by Amanor, (1999) revealed how some unemployed youth engaged in illicit night time harvesting of palm bunches even under tight security confrontations. Through other forms of

everyday 'action and production' such as land occupation, squatting, divestment by contract farmers, these marginalised groups express their dissatisfaction with the system and with diverse impacts. Guided by the concept of everyday politics, the study will explore the agency of different classes and groups of waged workers in negotiating opportunities and risks associated with the conditions of their work. The study adopts a relational lens-linking the experiences and practices of people to the social, economic and political contexts within which they live (Schiavoni, 2016). Every day or people-centred approach is particularly useful for unpacking of the varied political and economic reactions of those incorporated into land deals and plantation work.

### The Volta Oil Palm Land Deal: An Overview

In the year 2002, the Government of Ghana, as part of a strategic rural development and industrialization plan, introduced the President's Special Initiative on Oil Palm (PSI-Oil Palm). The primary goal of the project was to improve oil palm research and to develop nurseries for expanded production (to about 300,000ha by 2007) using the private sector as the main wheel of development(Sarpong, 2013). Although midway, the project collapsed, it contributed to an expansion in investor and farmer interests in the sector, not only through the establishment of estates but also in other related businesses along the value chain

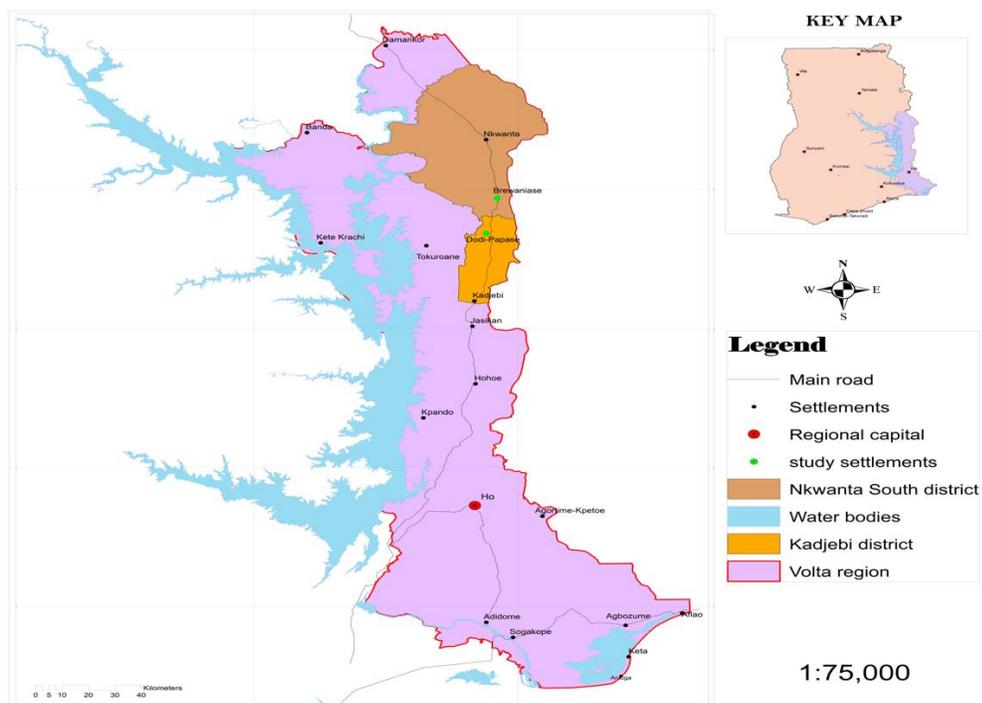


Figure 1: The geographical scope of the study

The British owned Volta Red company is one of such investments that emerged within the context of the PSI. Volta Red took over from the SG-Sustainable-Herakles Farms limited that originally acquired and begun the plantation in Brewaniase. The Brewaniase plantation in the Nkwanta south district covers about 3750 ha but the company also has another 40 ha of oil palm- known as the Atta Kofi plantation, and processing mill both in the adjacent Kadjebi district of the Volta region of Ghana (see Fig 1 above).

To set the context right in discussing the organisation of labour and the politics of farmworkers, it is important to note that new company as it stands now represents one that is struggling to operationalize its vision of production and processing- inherited lawsuits (from the landlords against the first company, Herakles) and outstanding rents, changes in management and labour came at a cost, and high costs of operating an off-site (about 30km away) processing mill due to lack of power supply on the farm have affected its finances.

The discourse on land grabs is often inclined to suggest that in principle there appears a strong business case for profitable large-scale farmland investments. Recent evidence suggests that it may not necessarily be the case given the several instances of failed or non-functioning deals and farm businesses in Africa, Brazil, and Indonesia etc. that are not making the expected profits (Cotula, 2012; Visser, 2016). While resistances can have considerable impacts on the successful implementation of land deals, we are reminded of how the dynamics and tensions of finance-led agriculture affect the operational running of large farms- poor knowledge on the context of their agriculture markets, compensation costs, the volatility of farming, the huge costs of developing 'idle' or marginal lands, among others (Visser, 2015). Historically, the plantation site has also been prone to fires and every year in the dry seasons, stringent measures-e.g. irrigation and the employment of fire guards, have to be taken to control fires. Currently, about 2500ha of land have been cropped, but only 1000ha is being maintained<sup>5</sup>-an issue that the local people are aware of, and are agitated about. It was therefore not surprising to hear from the management that the company is yet to make the expected profits from the business. Nonetheless, through management and constant engagement with people and workers, often in the form of paternalistic relations, the company is quietly surviving, but usually to the disadvantage of labour welfare and their political reactions thereof.

---

<sup>5</sup> About 1000ha constitute mountainous areas and a buffer zone which will not be cultivated.

## **A Class and Gendered Division of Labour in Production**

Labour on the plantation is divided by tasks carried through a gang system; physical attribution, according to demand and season; and sometimes through discretionary decisions at the supervision level. The tasks are also gendered with men being more advantaged to take up specific tasks. The core labourers engage in work that directly affect production- crop and soil maintenance, weed control and harvest-related activities. These include pruning, slashing, round-weeding, spraying of weedicides, fertilizer application, irrigation; harvesting, and loose picking. They are deployed through the gang system often consisting of 25 workers per gang. This labour has a mix of gender related tasks- some of which is purely male tasks like harvesting, pruning and spraying; slashing which is done by both male and females; and loose-picking which is also a female task, but upon demands for changes, some men are engaged. During peak season, harvesters employ their own workers some of whom are family relations, to be 'carriers'-head porters of the harvested bunches. They are women who could have social ties or not, with the harvesters. There are also the farm service workers, who are men engaged in technical and 'skill' related activities, as well the tasks that have close interaction between production and processing. They include mechanical engineers and fitters, carpenters, plumbers, vulcanisers, heavy-duty truck operators and drivers, as well as the loading gang who pack the fruits into from the farm to the processing site. The third group of workers are the support workers consisting mainly of security workers (also men) who sometimes also engage in fire control in the dry seasons. Women constitute about a quarter of the working population on the farm, but with no representation in management, administration and supervision. Proportionally, a lot more women than men are within the aging population of 46- and 55 years.

The plantation workers comprise largely of semi-proletariats. From the field survey, ninety (90) percent of the farmworkers are engaged in some form of peasant scale or small holder farming, with farm sizes ranging from one tenth of an acre to over 10 acres. For the minority that were not engaged in farming, about half of them were migrants who moved in purposively to work on the plantation, and the rest were either in search of a proximate land or not so interested in farming. There is therefore a mix of the landed, less landed, sharecroppers, dispossessed proletariats and even tenant landlords who labour on the plantations. Men have multiple farms and bigger farm sizes than women. Although access to farmland is an important aspect of the people's daily reproduction, landlessness was not a primary factor for working on the plantations. However, the land factor is expressed on the one hand by proletariats who lost their entire family or share cropped lands to the enclosure, and on the other by the vast majority of workers who depend on wages as a means to invest and expand their own farms. For many of the workers, education is an important reason for working on the plantation - the youth (males) in transition periods who are depending on wages to sponsor or pursue higher education, and being the primary source of income for most women

who seemed to be taking much of the responsibilities for children’s educational needs while adult men were concerned more about their own businesses and farms, or to building houses. All of these factors, are not only a reflection of the

broad socio-

Tasks	Gender	Targets	Target Off-Peak & Poor Field Condition	Income Hierarchy vis-à-vis the lucrativeness of the Targets
Harvesting	Men	86 Bunches	40-50 Bunches	<div style="text-align: center;">           High            ↑            Low         </div>
Pruning	Men	30-35	20-25	
Loose Picking	Woman*	4 bags	Daily Wage	
Round Weeding	Mixed*	30 Palms (2 meters around each palm)	same	
Fertiliser Application	Women*	200 palms (1kg per Palm)	Same	
Slashing	Mixed	9m <sup>2</sup> ×15 palms	Same	
Carrying***	Women	Per Bunches harvested	Laid off by Harvesters in off-peak seasons	
Security	Men**	NA	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively stable Wages</li> <li>• No lucrative Targets</li> <li>• Compensated with little bonuses</li> </ul>
Technical Support	Men	NA	NA	
Operations/ Driving	Men**	Flexible	Flexible	
Loading	Men	2 Trips daily (for a team of 4-6 people)	Flexible (Daily Wage )	
Spraying	Men	10 fillings per day	Same	
Irrigation	Men			

economic inequalities within the country but also influences their terms of incorporation in to the land deal, and their political reactions.

**Table 1: Labour Organization on the Volta Red Plantation**

*Source: Author, 2018*

\* Woman-dominated task, but as when necessary men could be engaged \*\* one woman each in Security and Operations/driving \*\*\* Not formally recognised- flat wage paid by harvesters

### **Casualisation : Acquiescence, Absenteeism, and Non-compliance**

Labour conditions on the plantation does not fit neatly into black or white, good or bad scenarios. It is neither akin to the 'slavery' conditions of exploitation nor the people's imaginations of benign work practices. It is characterised by a complex mix of (in)flexibility, (in)formality, compulsion and persuasion, all of which are embedded in strong paternalistic and patronage relations. Some of the key issues raised during interviews had to do with casualisation, labour mobility and time-productivity inflexibility.

The seasonality of agrarian capital has implications for labour demand- labour 'disposability' (O'Laughlin, 2017). At the initial phase of the land deal under the Herakles company- when clearing, nursery and planting took place, it appears the company employed a considerable number of people which was not unexpected given that the company had more or less acquired the land at a very little cost. Some have mentioned that at the time, there could be over five hundred 500 workers on the plantation (possibly exaggerated), but the figures have reduced considerably. In between the months of April and July, which is peak season of fruit harvesting, the average daily attendance is about a hundred and thirty (130) workers. Outside this season, the numbers can drop to about eighty (80) and even lower on Saturdays. Common with most plantation work, the vast proportion of the workers are on six months casual contracts, as such the total number of workers labour is very fluid. Approximately, every seven out of ten of the workers whether male or female are casually employed with six months renewable contracts. There were few casual workers who did not have contracts as of the time of the research- for some of them it appeared they used to students who come to work

during vacations but had not been fully integrated. A majority of the permanent workers claim to have enjoyed that progression under the previous management i.e. under Herakles Company between 2009 and 2013. It also resonated with the findings from management who mentioned that since they took over, there has not been a significant progression from casual to permanent contracts partly because of financial struggles. Yet, they also maintained that hard work and commitment were the key determining factors- a claim that many long-serving workers could not agree with. Aside from those who are known to be recognised casual workers, there is also seasonal group workers, known as the 'Carriers' who are employed by the harvesters to speed up their tasks in order to work above their targets during the peak season. The main difference in the conditions of work between permanent and casual workers lies in the benefits of annual paid leave (21 working days), sick leaves, and security of employment and access to loans. Both casual and permanent workers contribute and stand to benefit from the national social security scheme. For most people, access to loans and paid leave are the main reasons for seeking permanent contracts.

As earlier mentioned, one of the central reasons given by the landlords for agreeing to the acquisition was jobs for the youth, but with the current intake, they do not see the benefits as expected. Certainly, this has to do with the fact that the company is unable to maintain all land in cropping due to the limited capacity of the processing mill as well as other financial struggles to hire in more labour. Nonetheless, the findings also suggest that it is possible that the current figures also point to labour supply shortages for specific tasks such as slashing. In the classic literature on capitalist development in the countryside as well as the contemporary debates on land grabs (Marx, 1977; Li, 2011), a major concern has been the issue of surplus population whose labour is not needed on the farm. In this case, although labour appears abundant, they are not readily available. In a conversation with a group of former workers, they expressed consciousness about the conditions of work and how they saw it more beneficial to focus on their farms. In the words of a former worker,

*'Every employee wants to see progress in their lives, but this is not the case on the plantation. The conditions are not good, and they sometimes do not respect our views because we are uneducated and casually employed. We worked hard on the plantation because we were sensitised about the positive effects on our communities, but if they could not cater for the welfare of workers, how much more entire communities? For most of the people who remain farmworkers to date, they are there out of desperation.'*

A casual worker also iterated why the company does not always abide by its regulation on terminating contracts of absentee workers, noting that,

*'getting people to work on the farm is difficult. The labour is abundant but its supply is neither guaranteed nor easy. They have to search for a new person, train him or her and hope that he or she stays on. What I can do in 30 mins on this farm. A new entrant might use over 2 hours and this will affect the company'.*

The landlords and the people were very intrigued about the establishment of the plantation which is the first in the two districts. This was expressed in the popular discourse of 'project' and 'company' and therefore expectations were characterised by the illusion of salaried, formal and permanent employment contracts took precedence rather than a casual and informal system. Many of the present workers were curious to know the labour regulations on casual work because they expected a progression within two years of work. The casual system affects different groups and classes differently and so is their everyday ways of dealing with it. The differentiation comes with age, generational dynamics within households, domestic norms, years of service, task, migrant status, education, skill, gender and class. For some committed and pioneer casual workers- up to eight years of service, they all consider this as an unfair treatment and one akin to peasant farm labourers who are often looked down upon. Yet while some still seek this progression, others actually do not want it any more depending on their household dynamics.

Casualisation is manifested not only in the employment contracts but also in the rate and frequency of labour mobility and informality in production. Recruited workers undergo one to three days of training depending on their experience and skill. In principle, they are to be employed in their preferred tasks, but that often depends on vacancy and their physical attributes. This is, however, particular to men, as they have much more flexibility and options to choose from the many men related tasks. Women on the hand automatically belong to the women's gang responsible for a limited number of tasks. While workers, most of the time commence employment in their preferred tasks, their retention is characterised by mobility between tasks as determined by supervisors' directions, and sometimes by personal requests from workers. There are however some particular tasks such as spraying (weed control) where intake is largely by worker preference. The changes often occur within related tasks e.g. switches between harvesting and pruning; from loose picking to fertiliser application or from operating to loading. Nonetheless, there are also instances when operators are made to do slashing,

or farmers moved to the processing mill. While the frequent practice of moving labour between different tasks is the company's way of managing with the small numbers and also cutting cost, it comes with differentiated degrees of impacts. Harvesters and pruners appear to minimally least affect as indicated by one harvester

*'in the peak seasons for harvesting, I can make up to ten times my daily target, with the help of carriers. But even when the season goes down, we shift between harvesting and pruning, and even that is also lucrative'*

Yet for some workers, it affects the workers' productivity, income and their ability to organise around task-specific issues. One worker noted,

*'My work is undefined. I am a casual worker, an operator and a driver. Sometimes they move me to join the mill workers, sometimes I transport firewood. If I am on the farm and there is a problem with the truck, my supervisors as me to will join the loading gang or do slashing. We are just hustling for them. I do not want to become an enemy so I have to stop complaining'*

Women are highly affected when they are made to do slashing. Some women, have acquiesced to this situation. However, others who have observed the seasons and patterns of the shifts and take action beforehand as indicated below in the words of a female casual worker,

*'Tomorrow I won't go work. I have told my supervisor that I'm not well and I might stay home for about three days. But honestly, it is because I know that the loose picking season is ended and we are about to start slashing. Slashing is tedious and we hardly meet our targets'*

It appears the piece rate system is actually a recent introduction upon demands from workers who despised the practice of free riding and perceived it as a fair system. Both supervisors and workers admitted that the daily targets have been formulated in consultation with schemes of other oil palm plantations in the country, and over time, negotiated with the workers through the testing of their practicability and in relation to the field conditions. What makes a field condition okay or not is however subjective, and often dependent on the discretion of headmen, overseers and supervisors. According to the farmworkers, although the targets are decent, the field conditions affect their output. This is a major problem because the working population is small, the entire plantain is not being maintained, and the labour supply for slashers is inconsistent. For instance, pruners and sprayers complained

that they are often outgrown by weeds even though sometimes they insist that slashers moderate the weeds before the spray. Given that they cannot always ascertain how the supervisors perceive the field conditions, they usually find their ways and means around it in order to keep going. In the words of a sprayer,

*'They cannot monitor all of us at a time, sometimes some sprayers misuse the chemicals or do a shoddy job, but they also risk being subjected to punitive measures if they are caught'*

The most contested piece rate targets has to do with slashing. Currently, slashers have to weed a total land area of about one-third of an acre (9m<sup>2</sup>×15 palms) regardless of the field condition. However, this reflects a lower adjustment (from 9m<sup>2</sup>×25 palms) upon the introduction of women into this tasks since 2016 and the general concerns from men who were already involved. Still, it appears a big challenge for both men and women: men who seek further reduction in the target, and women who want a gendered consideration. While the women have had some success in requesting for the support of men in fertilizer application- to carry the fertilisers to the locations of use, they are not satisfied with the conditions of slashing.

*'All the targets are demanding, but slashing is really tough. They said they cannot loosen up the targets for women - because we all are the same. ..they say what men can do, women can also do...what can we say?'*- KC, female farmworker

In an informal conversation with one of the management team, he made clear that even though it is tedious, women are more respectful, truthful and follow instructions better than men and that is partly the reason they are employed in that task. This is rather unfortunate because even for those women who do their own farming, this is the one farm activity for which that they regularly hire in labour or seek support. Indeed the issues with the contested targets and labour supply for slashing transcends the organisation of labour on the plantation to the wider societal discourses and perceptions about farm labourers particularly those hired to weed/slash. For most peasants or small scale farmers, their prime labour need is for weed control. Yet, not only is the local connotations of weeding as related to 'labouring' often associated with landlessness, joblessness, insecurity, migrants and other minority groups, it also unrespectable and sometimes even derogatory. Under such unfavourable conditions, it remains the task with the least labour supply.

The (in)flexibility of working hours is another issue. On the smaller plantation of 40ha (at Atta Kofi), which employs nine (9) workers and a supervisor, there is a great amount of flexibility especially in terms closing times. The casual workers do

not necessarily wait until the official closing time provided they have met the daily targets and activities as required from the supervisors or headmen. For the casual workers at Atta Kofi, this was very good for them as they could have ample time to engage in their farming and other occupations, sometimes they could close from work as early as eleven in the morning (11:am) instead of 2 pm. However, on the main plantation in Brewaniase, the situation is different. Due to the distant location of the plantation and the limited access to transport facilities, the workers have to work within the very defined time frame- of course, farm residents are the least affected. A normal routine is that off-farm residents have to be picked up by 5:30 am to the farmyard by 6: 30 am. Between 7 am and 7:30 am they are all transported to their respective working fields, this is also the time when many have their breakfast. Their working hours are often from 7:30 am until 1:00 pm, after which they have to wait to be transported back to the farmyard by 2: pm. They then wait again until 3: pm to be transported back to their communities. The latest time for arrival for some groups could be in between 4: 30 and 5:00 pm. Even though workers seem satisfied with the productive working hours of 7:30 am-1: 00 pm, the entire organisation of transport affects them adversely. This is a major problem for women, who have to start their day at least 2 hours earlier (by 3:30 am) and sometimes forced to wake their school children as well, in order to undertake their household duties. Also, their evening duties- including meals, often extend into the night. Even though the impacts depends largely on the household characteristics, in general, committed workers do not get enough rest, which goes on to affect their productivity and income. Although their access to transport is an improvement in the working conditions (after complaints from women) from the early days when they used to walk several kilometres to the farm, the current system still affects them negatively.

For men, their primary issue with time has to do with the need for ample flexibility to work real 'piece rate' i.e. not to be time-bound, or to be forced to work or stay on the farm until 2:00pm, or in the case of harvesters, not to be informally compelled to work until 4:pm during peak seasons. Compared to women, men have bigger farm sizes, and often have more additional occupations that also require their time. Often times, it is not much of an issue for farm residents or those who have farms near the plantation. Their on-farm reactions and expressions of dissatisfaction is very narrow in this case. This is because failure to comply- especially to the closing time leads to a loss of the daily wage. This is an instant punitive measure that many would want to avoid. The common way to go around it is to have good relations (e.g. family, friendship, work) with the headman or supervisor for occasional permissions. For instance, there are some farmworkers (male) who double as farm labourers -paid or unpaid, for those in higher authorities, and this gives them greater chances of being granted such

favours. That notwithstanding, workers generally acquiesce to these time conditions or absent themselves when necessary.

### **Income & Food Sovereignty Concerns: Non-Compliance, Production and Action**

The remuneration scheme of the workers is premised on a time productivity-skill based piece rates system. The baseline daily wage of GH¢14.04 applies to work in the core labour and support service. It is used as the yardstick for calculating the piece rate or daily targets for the various tasks in the core labour. The casual workers in the no-so core labour i.e. the skilled service such as operators receive a higher daily wage of GH¢19.5, while permanent skilled staff receive GH¢19.5 to GH¢25 cedes plus allowances. The harvesters who employ seasonal carriers have also been instructed by their supervisors not to pay them below the baseline daily wage. The harvesters appear to have agreed to remunerate them with a flat daily wage of GH¢15. The work of the carriers is not target based, but they have to function alongside the productivity of the harvesters who can work seven times above their daily targets during peak seasons. Several factors influence the monthly income brackets of the workers. This includes gender, age, skill, experience, contract, engagement in other occupations, and the lucrativeness of tasks i.e. its seasonality and the extent to which one can achieve beyond the daily targets. Slashers, for instance, are often associated with low income because it is not lucrative - their average monthly income ranges from GH¢200 to GH¢450 cedes as compared to harvester/pruners who indicated that their monthly averages ranged between GH¢500 and GH¢1000. During peak seasons, harvesters could even earn a net income of over GH¢1500 per month (after paying their carriers) and during off-peak seasons, some of them are moved to do pruning which also tedious but lucrative. Women remain in the lowest income brackets, as carriers with flat wage and seasonal income, or as loose pickers, slashers, and fertiliser applicators with a vast majority taking a monthly wage range between GH¢200 and GH¢350 -below the expected monthly wage if they are regular. Other tasks in the core labour such spraying and irrigation are not accompanied with lucrative targets- spraying is widely perceived locally as a health risk and therefore workers themselves are not interested in any extra job, while irrigation is done with some fixed specifications. These two groups, in addition to the workers in the support services and farm service labour, have relatively stable wages and are compensated with some bonuses. Both casual and permanent workers in the core labour receive the same daily wage of GH¢14.04 (approx. 2.9 USD) which is about forty-five percent higher than the national minimum wage of GH¢ 9.68. However, compared to the conventional local farm labour rates, the plantation wages are far lower. For instance, sprayers earn half of their local rates,

while slashers earn only a third of what they would have been paid for the same amount of work on small scale farms. Yet, they prefer to be on the plantation for the relative security of employment and income as compared to doing 'by day' farm jobs.

One major issue is the delay in the payment of monthly wages. From observations and reports from workers, their wages are often delayed by two weeks. Some workers, such as those with good family support systems, other income generating occupations and those who have worked in the formal sector before do not consider it as some kind of normal condition that people have to adapt especially because there they never have backlogs of unpaid rents. For migrants, the less landed, women and the landed who depend on the income for their farm investments, it is condition they find difficult to accept. There is a frequent (in)formal sensitization and persuasions regarding the financial struggles of the company and its efforts towards a better future and this often serve as a tool to calm nerves. Yet almost everyone complained about some kind of vicious cycle of indebtedness to family, friends and authorities at the plantation. Some of these tensions are revealed as one headman narrated,

*'...along the line, I went down economically because the pay from the farm is not only small but also usually delayed- and so, I am almost always in debt, and sometimes when I need money urgently for business, it is not available..... people complain about the delay in payment because they have not worked in any other paid jobs before. I worked in a private before and it is better here at Volta Red. The situation is that the money is not ready. It is a company, we have to understand them, they explain to us about the delay every time.'*

Nevertheless, the farmworkers who report to work within these two weeks of delayed payment often do so sluggishly, with low productivity, non-compliance and frequent complaints. Some especially men, also use it as an 'opportunity' to find other incomes either through farm labour jobs, motorcycle transport services or go on a few days break from work which also affects their income as much production and maintenance of the plantation. This is iterated in the words of a headman of the smaller plantation who said

*'A worker will call to inform you of their inability to come to work because of ill health- when you know very well they are telling lies, but you can't do anything*

*about it. Absenteeism often occurs when there is a delay in payment. After 20<sup>th</sup><sup>6</sup>, you can confer that in our attendance sheets, many people absent themselves to do 'jobs'. These attitudes affect us very much. e.g. At our place, we work as a team, for instance during spraying, one needs help with the carrying chemicals, absenteeism reduces productivity especially when we are not informed in time as a result of their anger'.*

One of the key findings in relation to how the workers respond to their working conditions in general but specifically to casualisation and low income was their consciousness about the need to continue with their own farming regardless of the time competition and trade-offs associated with it. Historically, these settler communities emerged out of a 'dodi' system, literally meaning 'cultivate to eat' whereby natives gave out portions of land freely to settlers to cater for their food needs. Certainly, following the fast spread of commodification of the rural, and with cocoa becoming a major cash crop in these areas, the gifting of agricultural lands has become rare, and the system replaced with tenancy agreements. Yet, farming for subsistence remains an important feature of the people's social reproduction. As it was evident in the survey conducted, almost everyone cultivated some corn or cassava, and even cash crop sharecroppers are often allowed by their landlords to intercrop some foods for their own subsistence. Although occasional or seasonal purchases food items is normal, there is a societal expectation of being able to produce one's own staple foods or at least receiving food crops from one's land through tenants. In conversation with an operator who is also youthful and a migrant, he said,

*'I have just acquired a piece of land from my landlord (residential) to plant corn and cassava. My friends have been teasing me and I also realised that I can't be buying food all the time. They have agreed to help me in labour to start the farm this year so that I don't waste my money on food'.*

Given this background, the farmworkers cash needs are not directly targeted at food even though many depend on the cash for farm inputs. Rather, many used their wages for household needs like educational costs and shelter. Indeed in 2017, the farm management heeded to the request of the farm residents, many of whom are less landed migrants and allowed them to farm portions of the land that were not maintained- of course, this was also a management strategy to control weed and fire in the unmaintained portions. Nonetheless, the scheme had its

---

<sup>6</sup> The first working day of the month start from 15<sup>th</sup>

shortfalls regarding labour competition and conflicts of interests whereby supervisors were also implicated thus leading to its annulment after a year. The workers have also been permitted to collect foodstuff<sup>7</sup> from the farm albeit they are sometimes restricted when it competes with their transport space.

Also, for many casual workers, they could not risk being laid off and being food insufficient at the same time. This consciousness is a major driver for the continuance of their small scale farming along-side the plantation work. The competition that exists between the plantation work and own farming is real, but most of them will not compromise on their own farms to the extent of being short of staple foods especially corn and cassava. In general, their physical presence on their own farms is reduced and often replaced with labour and chemical inputs, but in the farming seasons i.e. during planting and harvesting, they spend ample time on their own farms as compared to the plantation work. The average number of working days for most of the workers ranges between 18 and 20 days out of the expected even 26/27 days or even lower during the farming seasons. Workers have been seeking for the elimination of Saturday work, but since that has not been granted, more than half of them do not turn up on Saturdays yet they do not face sanctions either,- a situation which management has come to terms with, given the societal context of their operation.

Access to labour support, farm location and employment contract play key roles in shaping the dynamics of time-labour division between the plantation work and own farming. Permanent workers sometime schedule their annual leave during their farming season. Security workers on the plantation, who are all permanent staff, have informally re-organised their formal working hours from 12 hours a day to a continuous 48hours so that they can two full days every week. The common explanation was for them to have time for their farm activities. On the hand, casual workers skip some days off work or take their own break. In the case of a female casual farmworker who doubles as dispossessed proletariat and now sharecrops, during the planting seasons for corn and groundnut, she takes a week off the plantation work, and with the support of her children, she spends the whole period on the farm because of its distance from home. For another young male pioneer casual worker, he can take up to one month break during the rice season, he relies on his own labour and mostly hired labour. Others also search for short term farm labour opportunities that give them direct access to food. Occasionally, some casual farmworkers whose farms are adjacent the plantation, exploit the transport

---

<sup>7</sup> Remnants from farms of the dispossessed tenants and landowners, usually cassava.

service to and from the farm yard but absent themselves from work on the plantation.

### **Occupational Health & Safety: Non-Compliance, Deception and Acquiescence**

The conditions of work on plantations are often associated with some health implications. On the smaller plantation, workers complained about the lack of basic sanitary facilities such as potable water and toilets. Various tasks also come with diverse health risks. Workers, especially those in the tasks of Sprayings, harvesting and pruning are very much aware of the health implications of their work, and therefore seek some preferential treatment in access to health. Many of them indicated that they have in the past had regular screenings and check-ups but this has not been continued in the last years or two. Given their proneness to lung and heart infections, they would like to have biannual screenings. Acquiescence is common of responding to these issues The health case of pioneer headman who works on the smaller plantation,

*'I was diagnosed with an enlarged heart in 2016. I was overworking 2014, we were just 3 people handling the 40 acres. We started getting more hands in 2013-2014. I used to do harvesting for the whole farm. It is my company, ... they paid for my hospital bills, and my workload has come down but I am not well'.*

Truck and heavy duty operators also have some challenges with defective equipment of which they have to improvise to make them functional. Doing so puts not only them but all workers who are also transported in these trucks, at risks of accidents. Many of them, however, mentioned that over time, they have learned to improvise. This is was evident in a demonstration by one operator who is casual and with no licence,

*'This truck has no starter and no break. The steer is poorly aligned and you can see that manifest in the front wheels. I have to start it in third gear and bring it to a halt in the fourth gear. Experience is the best teacher over here'.*

Most of them also do not have a licence for operations because they trained on the farm and do not have the financial resources to apply for a licence. Not having a licence also deprives them of any insurance against accidents. The financial struggles around having access to licences are further complicated on the one hand by their casual statuses that denies them access to loans, and on the other hand the company's unwillingness to commit to the responsibility of facilitating access to the license. For many of these operators, they believe that the

company's position is linked the fear that they would go and seek better job opportunities when they get their licenses- a situation that is very likely according to the operators.

All the workers are also susceptible to various forms of injuries often associated with the inadequate supply of protective clothing as well as the field conditions. While all workers have regular access to boots, other supplies such as protective clothing and nose masks for sprayers, gloves for pruners and loose pickers, and rain coats are either under-supplied or of poor quality as the per workers' expectations. Workers often raise these concerns at their weekly meetings with authorities, but the responses are rather persuasive, requiring them to be patient in waiting. For loose pickers (women), the absence of gloves put them at risks to nail infections and harmful reptiles especially snakes. Pruners also require gloves for the collection of spiky palm branches. These issues affect both productivity and well-being, and some workers resort to non-compliance to instructions as narrated by a worker in the pruning gang,

*'we do not have hand gloves for pruning so sometimes I also do a shoddy work. My supervisors expect me to collect the branches and park them as specified locations so that it doesn't hamper the work of slashers. Yet without gloves, I cannot work fast and I often finish work with palm injuries. So sometimes I do not collect the branches. They cannot monitor everyone, they cannot tell who did it, unfortunately, this affects the slashers too.'*

Another major issue on workers' health had to do with their medical insurance. By the plantation regulations, the company takes responsibility for any work-related health issues. As such, first aid is often provided for injuries and minor illness, and all workers are given preventive pills against onchocerciasis due the high presence of blackflies on the farm. It is worth mentioning that seventy percent (70%) of the workers are already subscribed to the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) which in principle covers such diseases. Nonetheless, from practical experience, many of the workers also want to caution against the extra costs that are sometimes associated with the NHIS scheme. Many workers complain about the limited scope of this medical cover- that it covers only health conditions that are directly related to their work e.g. injuries and pains whereas other indirect and long-term health threats are ignored. A lot of workers complained but the exclusion of malaria which many of them associated with their work.

*'They don't pick us home on time they have to wait from 1:00 pm to 2:00 pm to get home by 4:00 pm, why won't we have malaria? Yet when you get malaria they say that it is not a farm work -related disease, so you do not get a medical form'.*

Below is a young, educated and male farmworker's occasional way of dealing with this issue of medical cover,

*'sometimes when I'm sick of feverishness, I do not report that. I know the clinics in our communities do not have adequate capacity to detect all illness, so I complain of severe chest or neck pains which is directly related to harvesting. When I do that, I can get medical cover and also convince the medical officer to get me an excuse duty note for about 3 days...during this period I can rest, and also receive my daily wage'.*

### **Everyday Politics for (Agrarian) Development?**

What shapes the politics of the rural peasantry in relation to capitalist expansion, and how does it affect agrarian transitions and development? In this study, what is obvious is the non-revolutionary everyday politics- as we see in the demands of the workers for minor reforms in the organisation and conditions of labour. Indeed, the kind of everyday politics that the workers engage in as described above appears the most viable means to expressing their agency in the struggles for better terms of incorporation and this is determined by a multiplicity of factors.

Structural differentiation plays a key role in shaping their political reaction. Whereas in several land grab studies it is often assumed that dispossession, and having land or not, influence the political reactions of the people, in this study the dynamics play out quite differently. Given that almost every farmworker has, or has a high likelihood of getting some (tenant) land to farm, the question becomes more of access, in terms of what Ribot & Peluso, (2003) define as the ability to benefit- from the land. The location of the land, its fertility, and access to inputs especially labour are important in determining the extent to which farm workers benefit from their land and consequently, the extent to which they depend on the income from the plantation work (Paige, 1975). Women are often the ones with the least education and skills, with smaller land sizes compared to men, and even with a much more daily household responsibilities, as such they often have narrow choices as many of them depend largely on the cash income.

The interaction of structural differentiation and existing livelihoods conditions also affects workers politics. Everyone on the plantation is there for a regular access cash income. Yet, it is the unpacking of the purpose of this cash income, that we can understand their politics. For instance, while many parents need cash for education purposes, their commitment to work often depends on the numbers, ages and stages and even the financial demands from the type of educational institutions. The farmworkers who are currently enrolled in secondary or tertiary education or savings towards higher education do not seem interested in engaging in any overt or organised politics because they will not stay for long. Similarly, the cash needs for investments in own farm is also a function of the available land size, the form of ownership, access to family labour, the maturity of the farm, types of crops grown etc. In line with mainstream economic conceptions of politics (Popkin, 1980), they take rational decisions, calculating the costs and benefits of their actions- their everyday political reactions are thus premised on both individual livelihood and structural conditions.

The study also shows that both the structuring of capitalist agriculture and the existing social formations and domestic relations influence the agency and politics of workers. Due to casualisation, and movements between tasks, workers often lack a united front to organise on specific issues. For instance in workers' efforts to manoeuvre their ways around casualisation for food and supplementary income, they also end being irregular at work, which affects their commitments to such efforts. Besides, there are always tensions that evolve from the domestic and management relations in incipient attempts to mobilise. Lower level overseers and headmen, are often left in a competing dilemma of whose interest to represent- workers or management? Almost all of these headmen have been farmworkers before, or usually shift between labouring and supervising, thus many can identify with the challenges that face workers, yet there is a constant sensitisation from management on the need to protect the company, explain the company's position to the people, and prevent any outburst of violence. In the words of one long serving worker,

*'We have attempted a strike before. It landed the headmen in trouble because some workers informed management that the leaders spearheaded it. They were rebuked for that'*

There are several instances of workers doubling as unpaid or paid labourers of their supervisors or others in higher authorities in return for favours, small loans, income or gifts etc. which brings in emotions, fear, and subtle control in their

political reactions. The narrative below from a pioneer farmworker sheds further light on this.

*He received a call from one member of management whom he has close relations with, that there was an opportunity for him to rise above his rank to an overseer, but when they considered the amount of work he does for the farm, they decided to put it on hold for some time. He said to him, "Daddy who doesn't want improvement in life? When this man calls me to work for him on his farm, I still go. But I'm being patient, maybe there is something in store for me. After all, he was the one who hinted me about a likely management decision regarding my appointment when I had been ill for a long period- I took the necessary steps'*

These 'fatherly' relations between those in authority and workers is not only typical of many rural settings where paternalistic and patronage relations dominate, but also embedded in the existing societal contexts which is akin to the kind of intergenerational, and top-down relations between the elderly and the young, fathers and sons, chiefs and subjects, teachers and students etc. characterised by the societal expectation for high regard to authority which often times expresses openly or/and subtly as subordination and control (Amanor, 2010).

Looking at the broader picture, the existing policy and regulatory environment and the role of the state always fall short. It is characterised by a relatively non-existent state- absent, inadequate and unrealistic policies and regulations. Besides, workers poor access to information on the existing labour laws implied that many do not even know what their rights are, and how to pursue them. In effect, many people are afraid of a possible violation of state laws which they do not even know. It appears that the past, the workers attempted to organise, in order to form alliances or join the Ghana Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU), but this has not been successful. In an interview with the general manager, he explained that it could have been because of the poor accessibility to the district. He, however, mentioned that during the take over from Herakles farm, there were attempts for unionisation but they had to put it on hold because they needed space to settle in as a new company. He made it known that they are not against any unions, but from interactions with workers, they do not find an enabling environment for organising. Presently, what exists are internal welfare oriented associations principally established for permanent workers. This is similar to other contexts of commercial and plantation agriculture in Ghana as reported by Torvikey, et al, (2016) where these welfare associations focus more on social and financial contributions to assist members during social ceremonies than engaging in core

labour demands. Not only are they isolated from agricultural unions, but they are also removed from the state in several ways. For instance, in an interview at the local governmental level, it became apparent that the municipal assembly knew very little of the operations of the plantation except for the taxes paid by the company. In the national labour regulations also, there are no provisions for issues regards delay in payment of wages- this remains a problem even for the public sector. It is therefore not surprising that some workers consider it normal, or even better than other places they have worked. Again, how does one confront a company about low wages when they adhere to the labour laws of the country? They even pay 'unskilled' workers almost twice the required daily minimum wage? It reveals the unrealistic nature of policies and laws that govern labour markets, but even more, how it is skewed towards widening the inequality gap between the so-called skilled and unskilled labour, the educated and uneducated etc.

It is then evident that both rational and structural factors constrain these everyday forms of resistances as expressions of dissatisfaction and demands for better terms of incorporation. Yet a question that cannot be escaped is, to what effect are these everyday resistances and reactions? Do we risk romanticising everyday resistances or it could indeed have substantial benefits for peasant farmworkers? Some have argued that casualisation in commercial agriculture enables farmworkers to engage in other livelihood occupations (Cramer, Oya and Sender, 2008). While this remains a fact, for the workers studied, most of them preferred having permanent contracts and with increased incomes as compared to being casual workers. The reason being that the major other occupation for most of them is farming, which they also believe can be done with labour and chemicals under permanent contracts and with increased incomes. As such through absenteeism, they are able to engage in their other activities especially farming to supplement their livelihoods. Also for many others, days off work are opportunities to rest from the tedious work and gain new energy upon resuming. This is indeed good for their health and well-being since they are not entitled to official leave. Unfortunately, this practice also means that they might be forever stuck in the very casual system they despise because commitment is a primary pre-condition for progression. In effect, their politics also become a constraint to their upward mobility in the organisation of labour. This goes a long way to affect their income and job security and thus improved livelihoods. In an interview with a supervisor, he explained the situation further in conformity to the workers' reactions

*'People have been working with us for a very long time, but their attitude towards work is bad. At the time that we need workers for our work, that is when they*

*have left the job to go to their own farms. Sometimes it takes two to three months, especially when it is corn season. Imagine if you engage such a person a permanent worker. Sometimes when you make them permanent, their mentality change and you realise that the casual workers even work harder'.*

It has been previously illustrated how workers engage in their own production as a major way of expressing their agency to ensure their basic food sovereignty and food security. Nonetheless, the findings also suggest that there are trade-offs that suggest that all may not be well with their own food production. Many of the workers especially women, indicated that they have had to reduce their farm sizes in order to combine both activities. This means they usually have just enough for subsistence as compared to the past when they could have surplus harvest. Similarly, some tenants also reported that as a result of the low yields, their landlords have transferred parts of their the tenant lands to others who could commit to it. Also, in these communities, people often cultivate several crops at different seasons and locations, but what is happening now is that when it comes food crops, farmworkers now confine themselves to a few staples food staples—mainly corn and cassava. There are other food crops that they could benefit more in term food and cash, yet it is difficult to combine, as revealed below by a harvester,

*'I cultivate yam, groundnuts and cassava and corn. I have always wanted to add ginger but it is time consuming, and the regulations at work place won't allow you to do so. Corn can never have a better price than ginger'. - A harvester*

While the harvester above appears better off to cultivate all of those food items, a female proletariat complained bitterly about her inability to cultivate groundnuts as a result of the farm work. At same others also worried about the over reliance on weedicides and paid labour and their inability to maintain their own farms as expected. In fact, some farmers are no longer able to benefit from mutual farm labour support schemes known locally as 'nnoboa' because lack of commitment on their part. In effect, the apparent persistence of the peasantry serves more or less as subsidy to capital- peasant farmworkers produce cheap labour and do not depend on wages to cover the full cost of their household reproduction especially food. On the one hand, their everyday politics puts food on the table, but on the other hand, it is a reflection of a systemic repression in the agrarian system (Gupta, 2001). Their everyday politics on the plantation is individualised, has differentiated impacts but not necessarily adequate in confronting their everyday peasant problems.

## Conclusion

The fuss about global land deals or land grabs may be in the low key as of now, yet the implications linger on, and in diverse ways-beyond dispossession. This study has iterated some of the issue pertaining to capitalist agriculture, land deals, plantation work and their impacts of rural lives. The familiar issues concerning adverse incorporation and differentiated impacts serve as a reminder of the shortfalls of the development promises associated with large scale investments. Under tough labour conditions, farm workers strive to gain some benefits through everyday forms of resistances and reactions. Through non-compliance, absenteeism, production etc. they carry a strong political message that 'that they people are entitled to livelihood and dignity'.<sup>8</sup> They do so to ensure access to food, extra income, rest and well-being. Nonetheless, these everyday resistances have not been able to address the unfavourable agrarian transitions associated with land deals and farm work, and also may not necessarily liberate them into better terms of incorporation. These empirical findings suggest the need to pay attention to how the dynamics of land deals play out differently in different contexts. The patterns of evidence do not conform to specific or singular teleological ideals- for instance, the presence of several well-landed farmworkers does not make a lot of class sense in Marxist conceptions of proletarianization. Similarly, their politics is shaped by a multiplicity of factors that are structural (in agrarian political economy terms) but also rational (in neoclassical terms). Researchers who seek to contribute significantly to social change in the current era of capitalist development, have to tread cautiously to avoid imposing or exaggerating ideologies on the everyday lives of rural working people. In a nut shell, the hopes of win-win possibilities from land deals remain a mirage for local communities even when tap into some day-to-day livelihood benefits. Yet this is not only because of some 'bad' capitalists who exploit to gain abnormal profits but even more broadly, the working poor have nowhere to run to - they are persistently trapped in local, national and global systems that work against them.

## References

Amanor, K. (1999) *Global Restructuring and Land Rights in Ghana: Forest Food Chains, Timber, and Rural Livelihoods*.

Amanor, K. (2010) 'Family Values, Land Sales And Agricultural Commodification In South-Eastern Ghana.', *Africa Journal of the International African Institute*. Cambridge University Press,

<sup>8</sup> A quote from Kerkvliet's, 1986, (p. 119) work on peasants' everyday resistance in the Philippines.

80(801), pp. 104-125. doi: 10.3366/E000.

Amanor, K. (2012) 'Global resource grabs, agribusiness concentration and the smallholder: two West African case studies', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(3-4), pp. 731-749. doi: 10.1080/03066150.2012.676543.

Borras, S. M., Franco, J. C. and Wang, C. (2013) 'The Challenge of Global Governance of Land Grabbing: Changing International Agricultural Context and Competing Political Views and Strategies', *Globalizations*. Routledge, 10(1), pp. 161-179. doi: 10.1080/14747731.2013.764152.

da Corta, L. and Venkateshwarlu, D. (1999) 'Unfree relations and the feminisation of agricultural labour in Andhra Pradesh, 1970-95', *Journal of Peasant Studies*. Taylor & Francis Group, 26(2-3), pp. 71-139. doi: 10.1080/03066159908438705.

Cotula, L. (2012) 'The international political economy of the global land rush: A critical appraisal of trends, scale, geography and drivers', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(3-4), pp. 649-680. doi: 10.1080/03066150.2012.674940.

Cramer, C., Oya, C. and Sender, J. (2008) 'Lifting the blinkers : a new view of power, diversity and poverty in Mozambican rural labour markets', *J. of Modern African Studies*. Cambridge University Press, 46(3), pp. 361-392. doi: 10.1017/S0022278X08003340.

Deininger, K. (1999) *Making negotiated land reform work: Initial experience from Colombia, Brazil, and South Africa*.

Duggett, M. (1975) 'Marx on peasants', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2(2), pp. 159-182. doi: 10.1080/03066157508437924.

Gupta, D. (2001) 'Everyday Resistance or Routine Repression? Exaggeration as a Statagem in Agrarian Conflict', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Taylor & Francis Group, 29(1), pp. 89-108. doi: 10.1080/714003934.

Harvey, D. (2003) *The New Imperialism*. New York, USA: Oxford.

Kautsky, K. (1899) 'The Agrarian Question (Vol. I e II)', *Swan London*.

Kerkvliet, B. J. T. (1986) 'Everyday resistance to injustice in a Philippine village', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 13(2), pp. 107-123. doi: 10.1080/03066158608438294.

Larder, N. (2015) 'Space for pluralism? Examining the Malibya land grab', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Routledge, 42(3-4), pp. 839-858. doi: 10.1080/03066150.2015.1029461.

Lenin, V. I. (1964) *The development of capitalism in Russia (Vol. 3)*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Lenin, V. I. (1982) 'The differentiation of the peasantry', *Rural Development: Theories of Peasant Economy and Agrarian Change*.

Li, T. M. (2011) 'Centering Labor in the Landgrab Debate', *Journal of Peasant Studies*.

Lipton, M. (2006) 'Can Small Farmers Survive , Prosper , or be the Key Channel to Cut Mass Poverty ?', *electronic Journal of Agricultural and Development Economics*, 3(1), pp. 58-85.

Mamonova, N. (2015) 'Resistance or adaptation? Ukrainian peasants' responses to large-scale land acquisitions', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Routledge, 42(3-4), pp. 607-634. doi: 10.1080/03066150.2014.993320.

Martiniello, G. (2015) 'Social struggles in Uganda's Acholiland: understanding responses and resistance to Amuru sugar works', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Routledge, 42(3-4), pp. 653-669. doi: 10.1080/03066150.2015.1032269.

Marx, K. (1977) 'Capital: Volume One', *Karl Marx Selected Writings*. doi: 10.1093/sysbio/sys109.

Massicotte, M. J. (2010) 'La vía campesina, Brazilian peasants, and the agribusiness model of agriculture: Towards an alternative model of Agrarian democratic governance', *Studies in Political Economy*.

McMichael, P. (2012) 'The land grab and corporate food regime restructuring', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(3-4), pp. 681-701. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/S1057-1922\(2012\)0000018007](http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/S1057-1922(2012)0000018007).

O'Laughlin, B. (2017) 'Consuming Bodies: Health and Work in the Cane Fields in Xinavane, Mozambique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Routledge, 43(3), pp. 625-641. doi: 10.1080/03057070.2016.1190519.

Paige, J. (1975) 'A Theory of Rural Class Conflict', in *Agrarian Revolution*. New York: The Free Press, pp. 1-71.

Popkin, S. (1980) 'The rational peasant', *Theory and society*.

Ribot, J. and Peluso, N. (2003) 'A theory of access', *Rural sociology*.

Sarpong, D. (2013) *Oil Palm Industry Growth in Africa: A value chain and smallholders' study for Ghana*.

Schiavoni, C. M. (2016) 'The contested terrain of food sovereignty construction: toward a historical, relational and interactive approach', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Routledge, 44(1), pp. 1-32. doi: 10.1080/03066150.2016.1234455.

Scott, J. (1985) *Weapons of the weak. Every day forms of peasant resistance*, Yale University. doi: 10.2307/2070255.

Shanin, T. (1974) 'The nature and logic of the peasant economy—II: Diversity and change: III. Policy and intervention', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Taylor & Francis Group, 1(2), pp. 186-206. doi: 10.1080/03066157408437883.

Sulle, E. (2016) 'Social Differentiation and the Politics of Land: Sugar Cane Outgrowing in Kilombero, Tanzania', *Journal of Southern African Studies*. doi: 10.1080/03057070.2016.1215171.

Thorner, D. (1966) 'Chayanov's concept of peasant economy', *The theory of peasant economy*. Pp. xi-xiii. Homewood:

Du Toit, A. (2008) 'Adverse incorporation and agrarian policy in South Africa. Or, how not to connect the rural poor to growth', *University of the Western Cape*.

du Toit, A. and Hickey, S. (2007) 'Adverse Incorporation, Social Exclusion, and Chronic Poverty', in *Chronic Poverty*. doi: 10.1057/9781137316707.0012.

Torvikey, G., Yaro, J. and Teye, J. (2016) 'Farm to Factory Gendered Employment: The Case of Blue Skies Outgrower Scheme in Ghana', *Agrarian South: Journal of*.

Toulmin, C., & Gueye, B. (2003) 'Transformation in West African Agricultures and the role of family farms', *Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC/OECD), SAH/D*, 241(123), p. 144.

UNCTAD, FAO, IFAD and World Bank Group (2010) 'Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment that Respects Rights, Livelihoods and Resources', p. 21.

Visser, O. (2015) 'Finance and the global land rush: Understanding the growing role of investment funds in land deals and large-scale farming', *Canadian Food Studies*, 2(2), pp. 278-286.

Visser, O. (2016) 'Running out of farmland? Investment discourses, unstable land values and the sluggishness of asset making', *Agric Hum Values*, 34, pp. 85-198.

Welch, C. A. and Sauer, S. (2015) 'Rural unions and the struggle for land in Brazil', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 42(6), pp. 1109-1135. doi: 10.1080/03066150.2014.994511.



[aygyapong@gmail.com](mailto:aygyapong@gmail.com)

## about the author

Adwoa Yeboah Gyapong is PhD Researcher in Development Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies-Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her academic background is in Development Studies (SOAS-London), and Development policy (KNUST-Ghana). Adwoa's research interests are in rural development, social justice and social policy. Her PhD research explores the labour dimensions of land deals in Ghana. Her focus is on the struggles for incorporation, agrarian transitions following land deals and implications for policy. Prior to her PhD study, she worked as a teaching/research assistant and has been engaged in consultancy in research, policy, and M&E for international NGOs and institutions in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Zimbabwe.



Universidade de Brasília - UnB



UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL  
DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL



College of Humanities and Development Studies



Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies

