

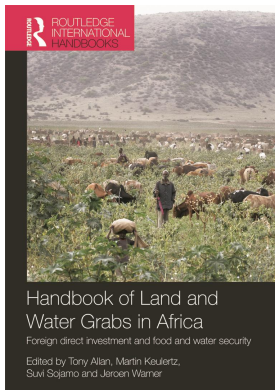
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## **Handbook of Land and Water Grabs in Africa Foreign direct investment and food and water security**

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## 1.2

# Land alienation under colonial and white settler governments in southern Africa

## Historical land 'grabbing'

*Deborah Potts*

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### Introduction

The current era of land and water 'grabs' in sub-Saharan Africa is attracting much critical analysis. There is, however, a long and troubled history of 'land grabbing' in the region. Key features of that history can contribute to contemporary analysis because there are lessons and insights to be derived from the past and the historical literature on the fate of the land and indigenous occupants is rich and detailed. This chapter will provide an overview of how land alienation from indigenous peoples was accomplished in the past, the geographical patterns of land division established, and the outcomes of the process for indigenous rural livelihoods. Where appropriate, consideration will be given to the water issues involved in the choice and use of land alienated from the African population and comparisons made to the current issue of land 'grabbing'.

As most of sub-Saharan Africa was incorporated into formal colonial rule towards the end of the 19th century, the fate of indigenous farmers and their access to their essential means of production, land, was influenced by the interaction of a set of factors. Most importantly, did the particular area they occupied attract a large number of white settlers who wanted to farm? Second, was their land reasonably 'healthy' for European settlement? In southern Africa, a third factor was the nature of the administrative control exerted from the European metropole: was the area British, German or Portuguese and, if British, was it a protectorate, a colony or chartered by the British Crown to a private company? Or was it not yet incorporated, having been claimed by the Boers, the descendants of Europeans whose history of residence in southern Africa dated back to 1652? A fourth, crucial factor was how densely settled the indigenous farmers were: were there very large numbers of them and how effectively could they defend themselves against forced expropriation of their land?

None of these factors was determinant. In relation to the last point, even the most determined and militarily organised groups could be overcome if enough troops armed with superior guns were mustered by the occupying Europeans, as evidenced by the fate of the Zulu people

against the British in the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879. Also agricultural land was not necessarily the goal the European occupiers sought: many British and Portuguese settlers had no intention of farming if they could avoid it. The first settlers in the Pioneer Column which crossed the Limpopo in 1890 and moved on into the area that was to become Southern Rhodesia preferred mining claims and prospecting to agriculture, hoping for the discovery of a 'second Rand': another gold reef on the scale of the Witwatersrand in the Transvaal. This was also the hope of the instigator of their migration to settle these areas, Cecil Rhodes, whose British South Africa Company (BSA) held a British royal charter under which it eventually claimed the vast central African territories of Southern and Northern Rhodesia. Early Portuguese explorations of the interior were also mainly seeking mineral wealth. Once Portugal had laid its claims to the regions of contemporary Angola and Mozambique during the Scramble for Africa in the 1880s, it struggled for generations to lay effective claim to these vast areas since there were far too few Portuguese settlers wanting to come and occupy them and those that did much preferred urban areas, often being migrant peasants who aspired to something other than farming (Bender 1973, 1978; Newitt 1973).

The occupation of much of southern Africa was not, therefore, mainly driven by white settlers who were experienced farmers with a desire to claim huge landholdings from which to make their fortunes. Nonetheless, well over 1.5 million square kilometres were alienated from the indigenous people for settlers and white-owned companies to farm (see Table 1.2.1; and Figure 1.2.1 which provides a guide to the temporal sequencing of the process in six of the countries involved).

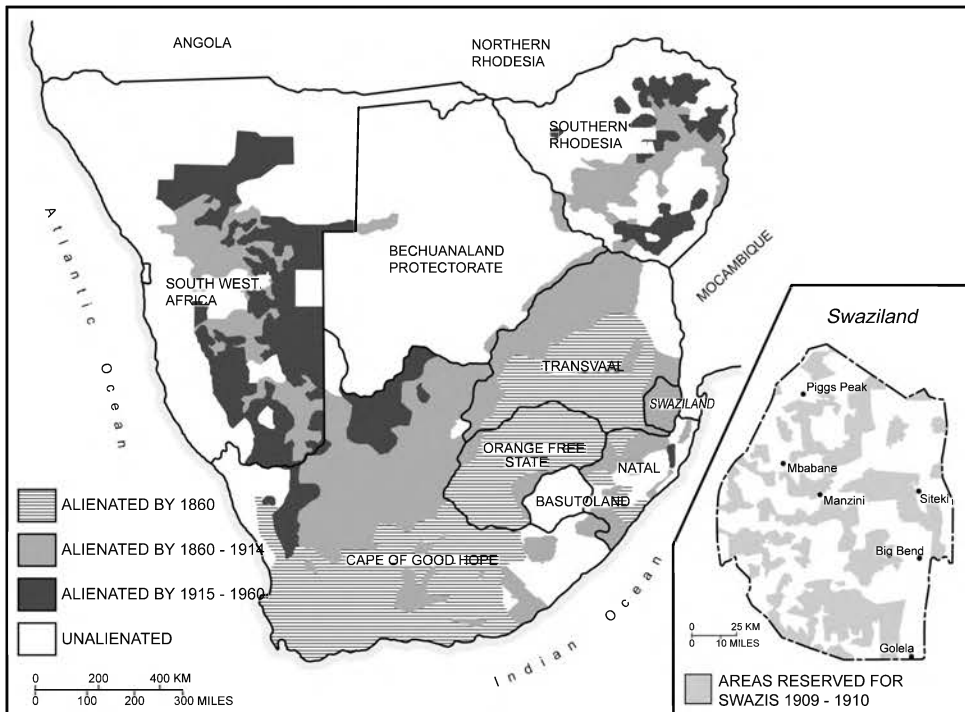


Figure 1.2.1 Land alienation 1860 to 1960.  
Source: adapted and redrawn from map in Silitshena (1990).

**Table 1.2.1** Alienated land in southern Africa: the impact of colonialism and white settlers (1sq km = 100 hectares)

Country	Surface area sq km	Year	Alienated land/private freehold/ 'European' sq km <sup>1</sup>		'African' land sq km		Other land <sup>2</sup> % Land area	Significant dates and notes
			Area	% Land area	Area	% Land area		
South Africa	1,221,000	1913	1,142,890	93%	91,900	7%	1840s: 'reserves' first established in Natal 1913: Native Land Act 1936: Native Trust and Land Act 1890s: 'reserves' first established 1930: Land Apportionment Act 1969: Land Tenure Act	
		1936	1,071,115	87%	c. 154,000	13%		
Zimbabwe	391,000	1930	198,899	51%	117,620	30%	19%	
		1964	144,513	37%	179,708	46%		17%
		1969	182,409	47%	182,409	47%		7%
Zambia	753,000	mid-1930s	32,374	4.5%	287,326 <sup>5</sup>	40%	56%	
		1972	24,281 <sup>3</sup>	3.2%	705,367	93%		4%
Swaziland	17,000	1950	7,612	44%	7,256	42%	14%	
Botswana	582,000	1970	25,899	4.8%	258,998	48%	48%	
Malawi	118,000	1902	14,973	13%	82,199	81%	17%	
		1974	2,225 <sup>6</sup>	2.6%				
Namibia	824,000	1990		52% <sup>7</sup>		48%	1902 'certificates of claim' ratified	

#### Notes

Areas may not add precisely to total and percentages may not add exactly to 100. These data are collated from diverse sources over many years, each source usually using different units (e.g., acres, hectares, square miles) which have been converted here to square kilometres. They provide a reasonable indication of the general scale of land division between different categories.

<sup>1</sup> Depending on country and year, alienated land unavailable to the indigenous smallholder African farming sector can be variously described, with the designation 'European' a reasonable shorthand in some cases, but not all; see text.

<sup>2</sup> Other land includes a variety of types including state land, game reserves, forestry land, national parks, etc. In Botswana most of this was the very dry western areas and most outside national parks remained available to indigenous farmers.

<sup>3</sup> Included unassigned land, forest areas, undetermined areas.

<sup>4</sup> Zambia: 37 million hectares of this 'African' land was in Barotseland which had special status within colonial Northern Rhodesia.

<sup>5</sup> State-held land: either leasehold or freehold.

<sup>6</sup> Freehold and leasehold land. By 1974 most leasehold land was mainly African-owned estates, mainly in tobacco.

<sup>7</sup> This is the percentage of agriculturally usable land.

## Historical land alienation in southern Africa to 1960: motives and processes

### *Settler farming versus peasant production: West Africa versus southern Africa*

The historical geographical expression of the four factors discussed above provides the basis for understanding patterns of land alienation in sub-Saharan Africa up until about 1960: from then newly independent governments began to effect some changes through land reform programmes, although southern Africa was very late in this respect because of the intransigence of its white settler regimes.

It is important to note that land policies in southern Africa (and Kenya) differed from other regions in that elsewhere it was generally in the colonial interest to promote peasant agriculture, which required that they retained access to most of their land. This was in part because in West Africa the ratio of Europeans to indigenous Africans was too low for any government seriously to consider exploiting the region's agricultural potential via white settler farming with the enormous impact on land ownership patterns this would have caused. The underlying population parameters in southern Africa were different because its history of European contact was so different.

To understand what occurred in southern Africa, it helps to start with a broad comparison between that region and West Africa where land outcomes were very different.

As noted, European settler farming on a large scale, which would have a serious impact on the availability of land for indigenous African farmers, could only really occur where there were many potential European settlers. This rather obvious point is one reason why the colonial impact in West Africa in terms of land alienation was so different from that in southern Africa. The colonial division of sub-Saharan Africa was largely driven by strategic concerns about claiming areas which had (or might have) important resources or were needed to provide routes to those resources, in order to prevent these from coming under the control of other, competing European powers. Once boundaries were roughly fixed, however, there was the question of how best to realise financial gains from these resources. Minerals were exploited in similar ways but agricultural resources (land and water) were not. Very broadly, in West Africa, with its densely settled indigenous populations south of the Sahel and very hot and humid coastal zones, it was determined that the best way for the colonial enterprise to make money, and raise taxes to cover its administrative costs, was to encourage the existing farmers to produce agricultural products deemed profitable for the European colonisers and their 'home' markets. With absolute control of agricultural and marketing policies it was not difficult to direct what was produced. Produce like groundnuts, cotton, coffee, cotton, palm oil and other tropical agricultural commodities were thus grown, taxed and exported, largely by indigenous farmers on their ancestral land, providing profits for the European-owned commercial enterprises involved in the trade and any subsequent processing and manufacturing, and revenues to cover colonial administration. There were exceptions and plantation agriculture, where it developed, did involve alienating land from local people. However, the demand by Europeans for land to own and farm during the colonial period was relatively limited, despite some hundreds of years of prior European contact with West Africa (mainly for the slave trade). Heat, humidity and malaria played a part in this. Many of the areas alienated in southern (and East) Africa were at around 1,500 metres above sea level, which significantly mitigated these conditions: that the main areas of European settlement in Nyasaland and Kenya were the Shire Highlands and the 'White' Highlands was no coincidence.

*Land alienation in southern Africa: 1652 to circa 1900*

White settlement on a permanent basis dated back to 1652 and the establishment of the Dutch East India Company's victualling post at what was to become Cape Town for its ships on their way to India and South-East Asia. The Huguenot settlers who agreed to settle there had a strong desire to create their own society and took little note of the Company's strictures about not causing problems with the local population or moving beyond the confines of the area under Company control. Almost immediately they began to take over land beyond that area, and the process continued for the next 100 years with little to stop them. The farms they established tended to be enormous – one norm was the idea that each man mapped out his farm by riding his horse for half an hour: that distance would be the radius of the circle described by his land (approximately 6,000 acres). With typically very large families, generations of Boers or Afrikaners, as they came to be called, took up land stretching throughout what became Cape Province up to the River Gamtoos in today's Eastern Cape by 1770 (Davenport and Hunt 1974). In the tip of Cape Province there is a Mediterranean climate, similar to that of southern Europe, where vineyards and similar produce can be grown. However, to the north in the interior the climate becomes increasingly arid. This means that in the absence of irrigation, the most agro-ecologically feasible agriculture is based on extensive livestock ranching. This climatic 'water' factor partly lay behind the extraordinary rate at which land was claimed for Boer farms, since their farming systems were so extensive. To have access to enough soil water to reliably provide enough vegetation for grazing large herds for a whole year required massive farms.

This land was, however, occupied. Thus the early process of establishing a politically and culturally autonomous new, white European society in the Cape meant the utter destruction of the existing societies and the theft of their land. Had the originally small numbers of Boers been faced with the sorts of established farming societies and political institutions found along much of the West African coast, this would have been impossible. However, in this part of the Cape the indigenes were KhoiKhoi and San people. The KhoiKhoi were pastoralists, as the Boers then became, their agricultural systems dictated largely by the agro-ecology. The San were hunter-gatherers. The Boers had no difficulty overcoming the thinly distributed and poorly armed KhoiKhoi and taking their land and livestock and they rapidly incorporated them into their farming economy largely as slaves, working as herders for the new 'owners' of the land that had been theirs (Willcox 1976). The San suffered the appalling fate that would face the Herero in South-West Africa 250 years later: they were slaughtered.

Alienating African-occupied land was thus achieved with little difficulty for the first 100 years of white settlerdom. However, the eastward expansion of Boer farmers then tried seriously to encroach on to land held by more sedentary Bantu-speaking agricultural societies, who had been first encountered in 1702 on the Fish River (Willcox 1976). They were much more numerous and able to defend themselves. The latter half of the 18th century was characterised by conflict and livestock raiding on this eastern frontier of white settlement, and the first 'round' of southern African land alienation by Europeans was ended.

At the end of the 18th century the British annexed the Cape and the next round began. The history of the 19th century of land alienation in South Africa, and the three landlocked British territories, Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland, which came to be administered from the Cape, is exceedingly complicated (Kowet 1978; Silitshena 1990; Bowen 1993; Murray 1981; Shillington 1981; Davenport and Hunt 1974; Willcox 1976) and cannot be covered here in any detail. Key pointers of some relevance to the study of contemporary land 'grabbing' are thus singled out. The simplicity of the Boer approach to taking land for agriculture was replaced by a range of different strategies reflecting contemporary strategic judgements. Over the next 100

years, up to the end of the 19th century and the Anglo-Boer War, the outcomes for the many different African ethnic groups within today's South Africa with respect to their land depended on these shifting judgements, and apparent safety in one decade with the British upholding the 'paramouncy of native interests' could easily be replaced by renewed land alienation by either the British or the Boers in the next. The advent of British rule in the Cape led, 30 years later, to a mass exodus of Boers seeking new lands to the north and their establishment of various independent republics, of which the most significant were the Orange Free State and the Transvaal.

During this time the capacity of groups to (try to) defend their interests did have some influence on whose land was taken, and the density of settlement also had some effect. Thinly populated areas were easily incorporated into European freehold systems. It is usually argued that the swiftness with which the Boers took over so much land in the mid- to late 19th century in the northern interior of what was to become South Africa was because many established farming populations were moving to avoid the military uprising of the Zulu kingdom which, by unfortunate coincidence, was simultaneously occurring.<sup>1</sup> Thus the current land 'grab' tends also to seek out less densely settled areas and is not looking to establish huge farms in areas like south-east Nigeria, Rwanda, Burundi, southern Malawi or round Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania: some of Africa's most densely settled rural areas. On the other hand, and in tension with this previous point, densely settled areas are often so because their agro-ecological characteristics are relatively favourable to agriculture. Often the key issue is rainfall (amount and/or reliability), although slope and soil fertility can also be important. These are the very areas which farmers seeking to alienate land for themselves usually recognise as more desirable and profitable. Thus, unoccupied lands are also unlikely to be the target of land 'grabs'.

A further factor was that, in theory, British colonial administrations were meant to protect the 'natives' interests'. After failing to hold their lands by force, as the 19th century progressed some indigenous groups under extreme threat of losing their land from encroaching Boers sought, in desperation, to be 'protected' by being incorporated into the British colonial fold. Unfortunately the boundaries then set by the British, which were to define that 'nation's' available arable land in perpetuity, did not tally with the historical extent of the agricultural territories these groups had occupied and used. For example, '[t]he present boundaries of Lesotho were fixed in the Treaty of Aliwal North of 1869, by which the Basotho were forced to cede much of the land they had previously occupied and farmed' (Murray 1981: 10, citing Sanders 1975). British strategic considerations relating to appeasing either the Boers or the Zulu, denying the Boers access to the sea, and ensuring British freedom of movement to regions north of the Transvaal, all played a part in the colonial 'protection' eventually extended to Basutoland (Lesotho), Bechuanaland (Botswana) and Swaziland. However, as for Lesotho, significant areas of Swazi territory became part of contemporary South Africa – in this case subsequently largely to become, under the apartheid regime, the Swazi 'homeland' of KaNgwane. In the case of Swaziland most of the colony had, in addition, already been claimed by white settlers. For Bechuanaland, proportionately very little land was lost to white settlers even though the area claimed exceeded that alienated in Swaziland; it covers a vast area but is generally a very dry country and was thus to some extent 'protected' by its agro-ecology. However, much of that which was alienated was along its eastern borders with the Transvaal which, by Botswana's agro-ecological norms, had better water resources. In terms of its arable, irrigable (rather than grazing) potential, this was a significant loss. The maps in [Figures 1.2.1](#) depict the outcomes of these general processes for land in Bechuanaland and Swaziland around the end of the 19th century. For Basutoland and Bechuanaland, subsequent British 'protection' did, however, hinder or prevent further land alienation by settlers as is evident from [Figure 1.2.1](#).



For South-West Africa, German colonisation provided no such protection and an underlying philosophy of German control there was to transfer land from the indigenous people to German ownership. The extent of that transfer in the early years of colonialism was shaped by the numbers of settlers, as the colony covered a vast area, and the geography of existing African occupation. Here by far the most agro-ecologically superior land, with the best rainfall, lay in the north, bordering Portuguese Angola (Werner and Kruger 2007), but this was the most densely settled by various groups, including the relatively numerous Ovambo, which ‘protected’ it from dispossession (Pankhurst 1996). The extremely arid coast, affected by the cold Benguela Current, was of no interest to farmers although its southern stretches were taken over by European mining interests and entry was ‘forbidden’ thenceforth to anyone to prevent surface diamonds from being taken. However, in 1904 the Germans destroyed the Herero in this colony when they rose against the seizure of their land; the Herero lost perhaps three-quarters of their total population in what is now recognised as the 20th century’s first genocide.

The alienation of land often occurred by straightforward conquest. However, in many cases treaties and agreements were drawn up with local rulers, chiefs or headmen which European settlers subsequently referred to as giving them full, legal rights to the freehold of the land they then occupied. However, as endless subsequent scholarship and oral history has demonstrated, the nature of most of these agreements was largely illegal, usually immoral and often absurd. Often, local leaders were agreeing only to temporary usufruct rights with no conception that the land was being commodified and permanently alienated from their communities; in other cases they had absolutely no jurisdiction over the land in question (as the Europeans involved were generally aware); and where payment was offered it was ridiculously small (and even then often not actually paid). One example from the end of the 19th century may suffice to illustrate: in Nyasaland,

taking advantage of African trustfulness, ingenuousness, and inexperience, individuals and companies obtained ownership of land on which large numbers of Africans lived and tilled the soil ... John Buchanan, a coffee planter, bought 3,065 acres in the future city of Blantyre for a gun, thirty-two yards of calico, two red caps, and several other tiny items.

*(Hyam 2010: 109)*

For the British territories north of South Africa, land seizures began in the last two decades of the 19th century and will be discussed below. It should be noted that structuring the analysis temporally is a simplifying device. There were many temporal overlaps in approach and processes. In South Africa, the Anglo-Boer War at the end of the 19th century did mark the end of the second ‘round’ of land dispossessions in South Africa and its neighbours, Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland. However, for South-West Africa, Southern and Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland, the era of the Scramble for Africa and the carving up of the continent at the Berlin Conference of 1885 was the start of a new, and different, round of land alienation in the region.

### *Land alienation in southern Africa: end of the 19th century onwards*

#### **The impact of commercial rule: the British South Africa Company**

The early decades of alienation of land north of the Limpopo River in what became Northern and Southern Rhodesia occurred under the jurisdiction of Cecil Rhodes’s BSA from 1890 to 1923. Commercial interests thus predominated even more than in areas administered as colonies

or protectorates. As already indicated, at first the BSA and the settlers hoped their profits and fortunes would come from mineral finds. These proved to be insufficient to cover BSA costs and after about a decade settlers were urged to take up land and farm, with the hope that this would generate more income (Palmer 1977). The original pioneers had in any case been 'entitled' to 12 square kilometres of land each. Much of the land occupied by the Matabele people under their king, Lobengula, had been alienated in the first few years of BSA control, after their conquest by Rhodes' forces in 1893 when they rose against the European occupation. Their agricultural systems involved both arable farming and livestock, with cattle a central element. Their occupation in southern parts of Southern Rhodesia of what is known as 'high veld' land was crucial as this was relatively tsetse-free: tsetse flies carried sleeping sickness for domestic stock and people. Their conquest led to the confiscation of their land and their cattle and their being pushed into lower-lying, much hotter and drier areas (Gwaai and Shangane) in the 'low veld'. The Mashona people further north also rose against the occupation and theft of their land in 1896, as for a second time did the Matabele. Again the Company forces were eventually victorious. The high veld land further north had much higher agro-ecological value than that occupied by the Matabele, essentially because of better rainfall, and white farmers taking up land here could operate mainly arable farms. The Eastern Highlands, along the border with Mozambique, were the best land agro-ecologically, with the most reliable rain, suitable for horticulture and, in the higher areas, coffee and tea. The influence of this on patterns of land alienation in the early years of white settlement in Southern Rhodesia is evident from [Figure 1.2.1](#): as can be seen, much of the high veld (a band of land running across the middle of the country from south-west to north-east) and the Eastern Highlands had been taken by 1914. Protection of the 'native interest' was scant under the auspices of a commercial company.

The jurisdiction over Southern (and Northern Rhodesia) passed to Britain in 1923 when BSA administration ended. However, there was a crucial difference between the two which was to affect subsequent land outcomes. Southern Rhodesia's white minority population was large enough by then to opt for 'responsible self-government' which allowed the white settlers their own Parliament and the right to pass laws. Although the Colonial Office was theoretically still in charge of issues to do with 'native interests', which obviously included land policies, it rarely exercised its powers, essentially ceding the right to dispose of African land to the settlers (Palmer 1977). Northern Rhodesia had a far smaller settler population and became a colony which placed a layer of colonial officialdom between the naked self-interest of the white settlers and the indigenous Africans. Alienation of farm land was thus somewhat constrained. In fact, land in Northern Rhodesia was generally of better agro-ecological quality, with better rainfall, than in Southern Rhodesia. Population densities were also low. Thus it was ripe for a process of land theft and white farming settlement. However, it was a huge territory far to the north of South Africa, from which the waves of white settlement of the Rhodesias had largely begun. To some extent, its location and size mitigated against white settlement reaching the levels necessary for serious uptake of its land, on the scale experienced in South Africa, South West Africa and Southern Rhodesia, before it passed into the hands of the British Colonial Office. Agro-ecological suitability for settler farming was thus only a part of the picture of the region's land alienation.

### Mediation of land alienation in Protectorates: Nyasaland and Swaziland

In Nyasaland, vast areas of land had been claimed by individual Europeans and large European-owned companies towards the end of the 19th century. In the Shire Highlands, in the southern region of the territory, experimentation began with various export crops, such as tea, coffee, rubber and indigo, in the 1880s (Pachai 1972; White 1987). This region became the centre for

European-controlled and farmed land during the colonial period, although tobacco estates were also later established in the central region. Far more land than that effectively occupied and farmed in this way was actually alienated at first, however, in the sense that it was claimed by Europeans in various ways.

Nyasaland then became a British Protectorate, as crucially opposed to a chartered company territory. In 1892, Sir Harry Johnston, the first British commissioner, reported on the various land claims. With at least some regard for their 'legality' and impact on local people, he repudiated some but none the less accepted 69, covering around 15% of all land (Jul-Larsen and Mvula 2009, citing Pachai 1973). Certificates of claim were issued for Europeans for these legitimised land claims and 'waste and unoccupied land' was placed under the control of the British Crown from which subsequent leases to settlers could be made. According to Hyam (2010: 109) the process 'left the Africans in [full] control of no more than two-fifths of the total land area of Nyasaland'. Vast areas in the northern and central regions were granted to the African Lakes Company, later transferred to the BSA. However, this did not translate to most African farmers being evicted or converted into labour tenants in the same way as was occurring in the southern Shire Highlands, although the later establishment of very large forest reserves, such as Vipya, in the north did affect African land occupation (McCracken 2003). The BSA claim was relinquished in 1930 and the land became Crown land. Although further mass land alienation across the territory for European farming was limited by its protectorate status, in the south Johnston's confirmation of European ownership of 1.4 million hectares (Krishnamurthy 1972) had drastic implications for the indigenous population. Here, in this densely settled region, there was deep anger and distress over the land already taken. This led to a violent uprising in 1915 led by John Chilembwe, who to this day remains a nationalist hero in Malawi; this event helped to focus the colonial authority's appreciation of the need to be careful with land allocations.

Similar colonial intervention occurred in Swaziland, where King Mbandzeni had, prior to the establishment of full British Protectorate status, conceded more land than his entire kingdom contained, and 'the documents that killed us' passed into local folklore. The British intervention in this process culminated in the setting aside of 'native reserves' which, in 1910, covered only approximately half of Swaziland's area (see [Figure 1.2.1](#)). This was deeply unsatisfactory for the Swazis, and in 1923 they sent a deputation to London to try to overturn the subsequent British colonial decision to recognise two-thirds of these overlapping concessions, but this failed (Hyam 2010: 108, 109).

### Land Acts: South Africa and Southern Rhodesia

The importance of the nature of the state as an influence on land outcomes in southern Africa has been demonstrated. In 1910 South Africa became an independent nation and direct British influence which had extended for a brief decade across its four provinces (Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Orange Free State) after the end of the Boer War was ended. Crucially, the British failed to ensure that the indigenous African population would have voting rights; thus was the scene set for a further 84 years of land and agricultural policies which would disadvantage them in almost every way imaginable. The same general political conditions emerged in Southern Rhodesia as it achieved 'responsible' self-government in 1923. In both cases an early result was the passing of crucial Land Acts which underpinned the division of land between whites and blacks for decades. In South-West Africa, the First World War led to independent South Africa being given, by the League of Nations, the mandate to administer the colony from 1917, with the proviso that this should be in the 'interest of the native population': a condition which it

promptly ignored. The general attitudes and legislative approaches towards African land rights which operated in South Africa soon followed in its mandated territory, where a significant amount of land had already been alienated under the Germans (see [Figure 1.2.1](#)) (Green and Kiljunen 1981).

In 1913 South Africa passed its notorious Natives Land Act. In 1930 Southern Rhodesia passed the Rhodesia Land Apportionment Act. In both cases the legally defined division of land between the races was disgracefully unfair. The essential features are shown in [Tables 1.2.1](#) and [1.2.2](#). In South Africa the Europeans took 93% of the land; the African majority (then 67% of the population) received 7% (the so-called ‘scheduled’ areas). In Rhodesia a very much smaller white minority was apportioned 51% of the land, and most of the African population were assigned 22%. Of crucial significance for understanding both the subsequent effects of these Acts and their real purpose is that Africans were forbidden to purchase land outside of their designated areas. Before then they could buy land, and some had purchased freehold farms. In Rhodesia a small amount of land was set aside for ‘native purchase’. Both Acts also prevented Africans owning any urban land in ‘white’ areas. The Acts were a devastating legislative blow for African farmers in these territories. With so little land relative to European, farmers their capacity to compete in agricultural markets was seriously undermined. Indeed, that in part was the intention. The Acts were subsequently revised, as shown in [Tables 1.2.1](#) and [1.2.2](#). The extra 6% of land added in 1936 in South Africa could make little difference to the essential issues, as African populations grew. In any case, not only did this extra ‘quota’ land have to be purchased by the government from ‘willing’ white farmers before being added to ‘African’ lands (and some had still not been so assigned by 1994), but the population in these areas was being artificially further increased by evictions from European land. Precisely the same processes occurred in Rhodesia as the various redivisions of land occurred in 1964 and 1969. The 1969 Land Tenure Act, assigning 42% of land to each race, occurred after elements of Rhodesia’s white settler minority illegally declared a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) from Britain in 1965. The majority of whites were urban but ‘defending’ the ‘right’ to hold on to the farmland alienated so long before was an important force in this political move. By then many of the farms acquired by force, without compensation, from the African population had been sold and bought by other whites.

In South Africa the African farming areas took on a new role after the National Party took power in 1948 and full-blown apartheid was ushered in. Political imperatives meant that they were redesignated as ‘homelands’ or ‘Bantustans’: areas in which various different African ethnic

**Table 1.2.2** Legislated land division in Southern Rhodesia 1930–69 (% total land)

Year	European areas	African areas		Other <sup>1</sup>
		Indigenous tenure	Purchase areas	
1930 Land Apportionment Act	50.8	22.4	7.7	19.1
1964 <sup>2</sup>	37.0	41.6	4.4	17.0
1969 Land Tenure Act	46.7	41.5	3.8	8.0

Source: Derived from data in Sibanda 1979.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> ‘Other’ includes, depending on year, unassigned land, unreserved area, forest areas, national lands.

<sup>2</sup> There were various changes to the land division set out under the 1930 Land Apportionment Act. This was the situation by 1964, a year before Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI).

groups would hold political rights. The move was particularly aimed at the African urban population. Similar ideas were mooted in South-West Africa (Namibia) from the 1960s. Southern Rhodesia also moved in this direction. The outbreak of liberation wars in both Namibia and Rhodesia, both fuelled in part by their histories of land alienation, made this particular use of African land areas hard to put into effect. In South Africa some extraordinary urban policies relating to influx controls on rural–urban migrants, African urban housing and decentralised industrial locations in South Africa, which were driven by efforts to reduce the African urban population on ‘white’ South African land, drove up the populations in many ‘rural’ African areas way beyond any realistic practice of agricultural livelihoods. Combined with mass evictions from white farmland fuelled from the 1960s by the progress of agricultural mechanisation, these processes led to 3.5 million people being forced off white land and into the homelands from 1960 to 1980 (Surplus People Project 1983), further adding to the pressure within these areas. In some areas the densities of population reached by the 1980s meant that they could be described as ‘rural slums’ (Murray 1983). Thus did the processes of historical land alienation in South Africa culminate in the utter destruction of agricultural potential for many black South Africans.

### Making European agriculture competitive

The history of land alienation in southern Africa can never be understood merely in terms of unequal and unfair land division, although the basic facts are so startling that it is perhaps unsurprising that many analyses do not go beyond this inequality. However, the profitability of owning the means of production, whether land or capital, is crucially influenced by the institutional setting. Without agrarian infrastructure and state support, even owning most of the land need not prove to be a successful and sustainable path to profitable and productive agricultural enterprises.

Farms need labour. In southern Africa, most indigenous communities had their own land and agricultural livelihoods. Their labour had not been ‘freed’ in the Marxist sense of being fully proletarianised and divorced from the means of production, rendering labourers dependent upon finding waged labour in capitalist enterprises such as commercial farms, mines and industries. The extent to which this issue directed settler state and colonial policies in this region cannot be overstated – it was probably more important than taking the land because very often land seizures occurred to reduce the independence of African labour and force men into the labour ‘market’, rather than to obtain more land to farm, *per se*. There is a vast literature on this issue for the region; key contributions include Palmer and Parsons (1977) and Arrighi (1970). Taxes, payable in cash, played a part in ‘forcing’ young men to seek work on European farms and other enterprises, if pay and conditions were too poor to encourage them to seek those jobs as a free choice. However, land alienation was a key tool for providing labour, as contemporary reports demonstrated, with European farmers constantly clamouring for more, very cheap, labour and pointing to the need to reduce African access to land (by alienating more) so that families could not survive without access to cash remittances from a wage labourer. The prohibition on land purchases outside the ‘reserves’ demonstrated that the real purpose of the Land Acts was to limit Africans’ legal rights to land in order to undermine their agricultural livelihoods.

Labour prices were also driven down by casting far afield, to poorer colonies with fewer competing wage opportunities, for workers. The various European-controlled governments and authorities in the region actively collaborated to provide a vast pool of recruitable labour which could freely cross colonial boundaries (Paton 1995). The whole of southern Africa became bound up in a migrant labour system centred mainly on the demands of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, as well as Northern Rhodesia and South-West Africa.

Providing land and ‘freeing’ labour were not, however, enough to make many European farms successful. African farmers on their own land, even as this became increasingly scarce, were more knowledgeable about local conditions and suitable crops, were often eager to take advantage of agricultural markets as they developed, and had the enormous advantage of control of unpaid family labour. In short, for some crops and in reasonable agro-ecological conditions, they could out-compete large, commercial farms. Examples include maize, the staple food crop, cotton and certain types of tobacco. Thus, again, European farmers lobbied the state to hinder this competition which was undermining their profits. A vast range of legislated prohibitions and obstacles to African commercial agriculture resulted, tailored to the specific local commercial farming ‘needs’. For example, burley tobacco could not be grown in Nyasaland without a licence (Tobin and Knausenberger 1998), and African-grown maize in Southern Rhodesia was all classified at the lowest grade, no matter what its quality, often making it unprofitable to market (Palmer 1977).

At the same time, as in Europe, large commercial farms on white-owned freehold land received substantial state support for agricultural credit, inputs, irrigation and marketing while this was largely withheld from African peasants. Eventually the combination of all these state-sanctioned and institutionalised factors – dwindling access to land, ‘forced’ migrant labour and denial of agrarian support – did largely break the back of the smallholder commercial peasantry in the region in the areas where smallholder success was deemed not to be in the interests of white settlers.

### Agro-ecology, water, market access and land alienation

The value of agricultural land is strongly related to available water. While one might expect that white settlers would have seized the best land in this respect in southern Africa, intervening factors of indigenous population geography and the timing and geographical patterns of European settlement mean that actual outcomes were far more complex. In very general terms, the ‘expected’ pattern emerged only in Southern Rhodesia. Here much of the high veld and the Eastern Highlands – the most valuable land in agro-ecological terms – became white farmland. The colonial state’s agricultural authorities mapped out the territory according to agro-ecological value, categorising areas as regions I to V, or X (see [Table 1.2.3](#)). Other factors besides amount and variability of rainfall (which are inversely related) determined these categories, but rainfall is the key factor. Each category was associated with a list of advised agricultural practices: the rainfed crops and/or livestock most likely to succeed. Region I was the most valuable, mainly concentrated in the well-watered Eastern Highlands. Regions I and II had a very good to good chance of yielding decent rainfed crop yields, including the production of the local food staple, maize. The riskiness of rainfed crops only increased for each subsequent agro-ecological region. Advice was that rainfed crops should be avoided as a commercial enterprise in IV and V, which were more suited to extensive or very extensive livestock ranching. Region X covered areas deemed entirely unsuitable to agriculture, mainly owing to aridity. [Table 1.2.3](#) shows clearly how advantaged European farmers were as they had claimed the vast majority of areas I and II, where profitable farming was easiest. African farming areas under indigenous tenure were concentrated in the worst regions, accounting for half of all the land in the drier areas of IV, V and X with large parts of the rest in national parks, etc. Yet smallholder farmers in many of these areas were (and still are) desperately trying to cultivate crops, despite the fact that the technical agricultural advice is that this will usually fail under normal rainfall regimes in those regions, let alone a drought. Unsurprisingly, yields are poor and many crops fail in most years. While this is often cast in the media as ‘a drought’, in strict technical terms this is not correct as the rainfall

levels may not have departed much from long-term patterns – the problem is that the division of lands pushed African farmers into low-lying, hot and arid areas which historically had not been much used for livelihoods based on arable agriculture. Table 1.2.3 also shows that European farms included large parts of areas III, IV and V, but much of this was under livestock ranches, supported by Rhodesia's sophisticated meat marketing system and associated para-statal Cold Storage Commission.

In South Africa, the pattern was mixed. The areas occupied by African farmers traced a rough horseshoe of discontinuous, fragmented bits and pieces of land from the homeland of Ciskei in the Eastern Cape, north along the coast towards Swaziland and then west and then south along the border with Bechuanaland. The agro-ecological value of this land varied enormously. However, one estimate is that its share of South Africa's rainfed agricultural potential was roughly proportionate: 13% of the land and about 20% of the potential. Much of the better rainfall area was in KwaZulu but here the often mountainous terrain constituted another problem for farming. Many 'homelands' to the north and west were very dry and agro-ecologically most suited to livestock farming.

In Namibia, the pattern was different again. As in Southern Rhodesia, the country was divided into agro-ecological regions and, as Table 1.2.4 indicates, the vast majority of the land suited to rainfed agriculture is found in the African areas under indigenous tenure, for the reasons previously described. Much of the European farmland is vast livestock ranches, many of which are not even suited to cattle, but to smaller livestock.

Access to naturally well-watered land in southern Africa was not, therefore, based on any simple racial division. However, Europeans on drier areas had various options which allowed many to develop successful commercial farms (although it should be noted that thousands of white farmers were also driven into debt and/or off the land by droughts, despite all their

**Table 1.2.3** Land division by agro-ecological regions (%), Zimbabwe 1980

Land category	Agro-ecological regions					
	I	II	III	IV	V	X
National and unreserved lands	16	6	12	18	23	24
African lands (indigenous tenure)	13	21	39	50	49	48
African purchase areas	—	4	4	4	2	2
European areas	71	69	45	28	26	2

Source: Sibanda 1979: Table 7.

**Table 1.2.4** Land division by agro-ecological regions (%), Namibia circa 2000

Land category	Agro-ecological regions <sup>1</sup>				
	1,2	3,4,5	6,7	8,9,10	11
Freehold (commercial)	—	36	70	66	—
Indigenous tenure	90	57	30	9	—
Non-agricultural land	10	7	—	34	100

Source: adapted from Table 1 in Wermer and Kruger, 2007.

Note:

<sup>1</sup> The regions with better access to water are 1, 2 with each subsequent region increasingly arid and less suited to rainfed agriculture. The official designations are: 1, 2: short-maturing crops and large stock farming; 3, 4, 5: short/long maturing crops or large stock farming; 6, 7: mixed livestock farming; 8, 9, 10: small stock farming; 11: unsuitable for agriculture.

advantages; e.g. see Murray 1992). One option was to hold such huge farms that livestock numbers were sufficient to allow a reasonable income. Another, and more recent, option was to turn vast landholdings over (or back) to wildlife, far more suited to the natural vegetation and rainfall regimes than cattle, and derive livelihoods from tourism and hunting. The third option, of particular significance to the topic of this book, was to irrigate crops or greatly increase possible livestock numbers by installing boreholes. The extraordinary changes wrought in the agricultural landscape and its productive potential for livestock by borehole technology (and fencing) in South Africa's Karoo is compellingly analysed in Archer (2000).

In Southern Rhodesia many European farms used irrigation on some part of the farm. In the hot low veld, huge irrigated corporate sugar plantations were established which were highly productive, in sharp contrast to the adjoining native reserves where people struggled to grow food in the very dry environment. Even in areas with higher rainfall where rainfed crops were possible, many farms had some irrigated areas, often from small dams on their own land, which greatly increased yields and the reliability of production (Hughes 2006). The growing season was also extended beyond the six months of the rainy season. In Namibia, the only large areas of irrigated land were under European ownership. In South Africa, there is extensive use of rivers for irrigation, and dams and associated infrastructure were a major item of government expenditure in the 20th century, with nearly all the agricultural water allocated to European farms. In all three countries livestock ranches were made far more productive by the thousands of windmill-driven boreholes that so characterised their landscapes. In all three, state support for irrigation for European farms was extensive (Derman *et al.* 2007; Turton *et al.* 2004; Werner and Kruger 2007). By contrast, one of the most successful indigenous irrigation systems – small-scale irrigation from shallow wells on patchy wetlands, which include the dambos found across Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi – was prohibited in Southern Rhodesia ostensibly for environmental conservation reasons but in reality to prevent crops being raised to compete with European farm produce (Wilson 1986; Bell *et al.* 1987; Potts 2000).

In Mozambique and Angola white immigration increased significantly after the Second World War, before which time agriculture was more based on African smallholder farming. Export crops from this sector had been developed under conditions of essentially forced labour in many areas and the system had an evil reputation (Isaacman 1996; Bender 1978). In Angola, white-owned coffee plantations (*rocas*) led to land alienation around Huambo on the central plateau and elsewhere – in the early 1970s the country was the world's fourth largest coffee producer – but in such a vast country the effect was localised. Of greater potential significance were large irrigation schemes mooted in the latter years of colonialism, partly to lay firmer claim to these colonies which the Portuguese, like the other white settler states, were determined not to leave. These were planned, for example, for the Kunene River in southern Angola and the Limpopo in Mozambique and were expected to accommodate many thousands of farmers, but the violent ending of Portuguese rule in both colonies meant the schemes were abandoned at the time.

Besides access to water, another vital influence on profitable commercial farming is access to markets. Yet again any scrutiny of maps of large-scale farms in the region which are, or were, European-owned demonstrates their superior access to roads, railways and urban centres for inputs and markets. Again this was deliberate policy. It is an important aspect of understanding land alienation impacts in Northern Rhodesia/Zambia, for example. Here only a very small fraction of total land was alienated by white farmers (see Table 1.2.1) but it was concentrated along the 'line-of-rail': the country's transport lifeline throughout the colonial period. This significantly advantaged the competitive edge of their production over more distant, smallholder African farms (Muntemba 1982; Palmer 1983).



## The lessons of the past

What can be learned from the history of land alienation in this region for the analysis of contemporary land and water ‘grabs’ in sub-Saharan Africa? First it is helpful to outline the points that are different and unlikely to be replicated. Current ‘land grabs’ are faced with sovereign states and are not operating in a colonial system where the interests and rights of indigenous people can be quite so easily ignored. Outright genocide and military conquest as routes to obtaining land are no longer possible. Some sort of payment for land acquired for use will occur – hence land will not be ‘alienated’ in the southern African sense. The contemporary process is partly influenced by issues of food security for other countries with fewer water and land resources of their own, with the objective of exporting the produce. This was not central to southern Africa’s historical processes of land alienation for, although commercial profit was crucial, broader issues of competing imperial strategies were at play. Export crops played their part but production for domestic markets was also important. Also European farming was bound up with the establishment of very specific local cultural traditions and, above all, settlement and identification with the country – features which the purely commercial motives of the current round will not replicate.

However, the fate of the citizens who now occupy land in African countries where ‘land grabbing’ is occurring will undoubtedly depend on the nature of the state and its relationship with its people. That was true in colonial southern Africa: white settler states trampled on indigenous people’s land rights to promote white settlers’ livelihoods and resistance was met with force, but in the protectorates and colonies there was at least the possibility that the government would prevent some of the worst excesses of ‘land grabbing’. Local officials could make a difference in particular areas at particular times even if central governments were indifferent, and good relationships between colonial officials and local traditional authorities could protect certain communities. There was a degree of local agency, in other words.

These factors are bound to be crucial in the current ‘land grabs’. Much of the desirable land in this round of agricultural investment is occupied or claimed by local farmers and pastoralists already. Land laws will vary from country to country and it is tempting to assume that this will be a key differentiating factor for the fate of local farmers. However, past history indicates that it is far more likely that laws, per se, will not protect local farmers. The key will really be whether and how state officials will promote and uphold the rights (inscribed in laws or not) of their rural citizens, when faced with a conflict of interests between wealthy and powerful land ‘grabbers’/investors and generally poor smallholder farmers or pastoralists. In the final analysis, the issue of whether the representatives of the state truly wish to represent and protect rural people, or are more interested in other outcomes, is crucial. Corrupt practices by the land ‘grabbers’ are likely to be important factors. The question of whose interests are being served and represented in policy decisions is thus the essential starting point. This can, however, work both ways: land ‘grabbed’ today in ways which set up strongly felt grievances among local people whose views are, for the moment, dismissed may not be protected by its apparently ‘legal’ tenure in the future if political forces change and local people’s rights are reasserted. The history of southern Africa in this respect which led, after violent struggles, to its contemporary land reform programmes is highly illustrative.

The other lesson is that land, per se, is only the beginning. As exemplified by the history of southern Africa, farmers are naturally attracted to land with water – from rain or other sources. There is plenty of dryland in many African countries but land with access to water tends to be taken up already. This sets up the scenario for conflict. Investors will also want infrastructure: roads and input stores, fuel and mechanics. If these are not already available for local farmers, it will be inequitable if

the state helps to provide them and will damage the competitiveness and livelihoods of local farmers unless they have equal access. Crucially, big farming enterprises need labour. The lessons of southern Africa are that this could be very negative for local labour markets if the deals struck with the state lead to poor wage rates and conditions. On the other hand, well-regulated conditions could enhance local livelihoods. The recent varied experiences of Zimbabwean white farmers who have tried large-scale farming in other countries like Mozambique and Nigeria are indicative. Where the state has been supportive, as in one part of Nigeria, their farming has been 'efficient' and productive, but at huge cost to the local population in lost land, and in the opportunity cost of the budget spent on infrastructure for the farmers which could have had even better outcomes if it had been spent on local smallholders (Hammar 2010; Mustapha 2011).

This last point leads to a further insight from southern Africa's history, which is that there should be no presumption that large-scale exportable surpluses can only be derived from large-scale 'alien' 'land grabbing' commercial farms. Again and again throughout the region the entrepreneurialism and potential of the local peasantry has been demonstrated, a more recent example being Zimbabwe's positive 'agricultural revolution' of the 1980s (Rukuni and Eicher 1994) when smallholders overtook the large farmers' prior domination of the maize and cotton markets. The potential and economic, developmental and political advantages of spending the budget for supporting the large farmers on the peasantry instead requires consideration by all involved.

In sum, the outcomes of 'land grabbing' today can only partly be theorised in terms of political ecology, which focuses on how power relations influence access to natural resources (e.g. land and water), because ultimately those power relations are rooted in the political economy and, as the bitter history of southern Africa demonstrates, commercial farmers demand far more from the state than just natural resources.

## Note

- 1 There is a fierce debate among southern African historians about the roots of the Zulu-induced Mfecane (the forced migration) at this time. One view is that there were exogenous causes related to European incursions, in this case the impact of slavery further north in contemporary Mozambique.

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