

Report on Fellowship from 01 February to 31 May 2020

**Interdisciplinary Fellowship Group on Sustainable Rural Transformation (IFG3).
Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA)**

By Peter Narh and Lisa Hoffman (IFG3 co-convenors)

Introduction and thematic overview

Africa's rural areas are facing tremendous challenges including persistent poverty, demographic pressure, an eroding resource base, and climatic change. At the same time, the natural resources of the continent receive reinforced interest of foreign and domestic investors. For example, since 2000, foreign investors alone have secured concessions for more than 10 million hectares of farmland in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, domestic urban elites consider investments in agricultural land as lucrative and many countries experience an emerging medium-scale farming sector catering mainly to increasing urban food demands. Agriculture competes for land to be used for pasture, housing and conservation and the increased pressure on resources is not limited to land, but extends to water, natural forests and mining resources. The increasing competition for resources affects the lives of rural populations in multiple ways and may even result in social conflict. For example, the expansion of commercial land uses and the associated land-use change threatens local livelihoods, in particular smallholder production or pastoralism. This is because land acquired by investors rarely lies idle and such acquisitions can directly deprive people of the foundations of their livelihood. Further, huge negative external effects on natural environments may result from these processes. Land conversion may affect biodiversity-rich areas, particularly tropical forests, and intensified agricultural production often goes hand in hand with monocultures and heavily increased use of chemical inputs and water resources.

In contrast to these adverse effects, the commercialization of agricultural production can provide new opportunities, e.g. through increased productivity, out-grower schemes, wage employment and the upscaling of smallholder agriculture. These opportunities extend beyond agriculture and include the entire value chain of agro-processing; a value chain that also finds itself in transformation. However, many of these opportunities have not yet been grasped and the terms and conditions of rural transformation have often not delivered sustainable livelihood outcomes. Instead they have exposed smallholders to the vicissitudes of global commodity markets. A sustainable transformation of rural Africa simultaneously addresses economic, social and environmental dimensions of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. It fosters synergies and avoids or manages trade-offs between these different dimensions.

Guiding questions:

- How to achieve a sustainable transformation of rural Africa?
- What is the role of (formal and informal) institutions in this process?
- How does the increased geo-economic competition in Africa affect rural transformation?
- Under what conditions do large-scale land acquisitions promote sustainable development or alternatively translate into social conflicts and inequalities?
- How to mitigate risks for vulnerable groups (e.g. women and youths)?
- How to mitigate climate risks in order to guarantee food security?

MIASA provided the platform to exchange about current research, combine knowledge by producing common output, develop innovative research ideas and translate research into practice. Its aim was to bring together researchers applying different methods (i.e. quantitative or qualitative) in order to have a broad spectrum of methods and topics which complement each other.

IFG3

Between 01 February and 31 May 2020, the third Interdisciplinary Fellowship (IFG3) at the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA) was opened, on the theme “Sustainable Rural Transformation in Africa”.

The Fellowship Group was constituted of ten Fellows, from institutions in Germany, Ghana, Netherlands, Nigeria, and the United States: Dr. Prince Osei-Wusu Adjei (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology), Dr. Osman Alhassan (University of Ghana), Dr. John Boateng (University of Ghana), Ms. Lisa Hoffmann (German Institute for Global and Area Studies GIGA), Prof. Michael Jacobson (Pennsylvania State University), Dr. Melina Kalfelis (University of Bayreuth), Dr. Peter Narh (University of Ghana), Dr. Ifeanyi Onwuzuruigbo (University of Ibadan), Dr. Maya Turolla (Radboud University), and Dr. Efobi Uchenna (Covenant University). IFG3 was planned as a fully residential programme. However, it became virtual from mid-March onwards due to the worldwide spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The IFG3 Fellows were supported by two Principal Investigators (PIs), Prof. Dzodzi Tsikata (University of Ghana), and Apl. Prof. Jann Lay (German Institute for Global and Area Studies GIGA), as well as by two MIASA Directors, Prof. Abena Oduro (Ghana Director) and Prof. Gordon Crawford (Germany Director), the MIASA Academic Coordinator Dr. Agnes Schneider-Musah, and the MIASA Administration team led by Mrs. Rebecca Adu. MIASA invited a guest researcher, Prof. Evans Osabuohien from the Covenant University to collaborate and exchange with IFG3. Peter Narh from the University of Ghana, and Lisa Hoffmann from GIGA Germany were appointed co-convenors of IFG3.

Co-convenors

As co-convenors, Peter Narh and Lisa Hoffmann were responsible to coordinate the IFG in terms of logistics and content. Logistically, they liaised between IFG3 Fellows, MIASA, University of Ghana and GIGA as key institutions of IFG3. More specifically, they coordinated regular meetings (kick-off meeting, Jour Fixes, internal seminars and a methods group), updated the MIASA Handbook (IFG3 version) with relevant information on academic and social events in Accra and ensured functional working spaces at the MIASA premises. Together with the two PIs, the convenors helped determine the research focus on the IFG3 by forming sub-groups on specific thematical foci and organizing the concluding conference.

Working structures

Work during the Fellowship was structured around regular meetings, office time and field research.

Kick-off meeting

The IFG3 started off formally at the University of Ghana on 03 February 2020 with in-house and campus orientations, followed by a three-day kick-off meeting from 04 to 07 February 2020. This

meeting was jointly organised by the PIs and MIASA Directors, and coordinated by Lisa Hoffmann and Peter Narh as co-convenors. The kick-off meeting introduced the Fellowship Group to MIASA and the University of Ghana, and sought to understand and integrate the intended work of the Fellows over the next four months. Each Fellow explained their project, and identified other Fellows they could work with in a team within the four-months Fellowship period and beyond. It was important that Fellows' joint and individual work centred on the overarching topic "Sustainable rural transformation", thus this kick-off meeting was aimed also at providing initial guidance to Fellows towards formation of sub-groupings to work on the Fellowship theme. Four sub-groupings of the Fellows were eventually formed, which also constituted panels for the IFG3 concluding conference as explained below. The four sub-groups were on the themes "Internal mobility and rural transformation" (Maya Turolla and Lisa Hoffmann), "Resource conflicts, violence and rural transformation" (Melina Kalfelis, Ifeanyi Onwuzuruigbo, Osman Alhassan), "Large-scale land acquisitions and livelihoods" (Lisa Hoffmann, Evans Osabuohien, Uchenna Efobi), and "Environmental and resource impacts, technology and agriculture" (Michael Jacobson, John Boateng, Prince Osei-Wusu Adjei, Peter Narh). These groups however were not isolated from each other but attempted to proceed on a common framework such as the conceptualization of sustainable rural transformation in Africa.

Jour fixe

Each Monday, an hour-and-a half in the afternoon was dedicated to Fellows' meeting, referred to as Jour Fixe, to report on and review Fellows' work. These meetings were regularly attended by the Ghana Director of MIASA Prof. Abena Oduro and sometimes by the two PIs to provide critical comments and supportive ideas to ongoing discussions. Most of the running of the IFG3 on daily basis and specific programmes such as the seminar and conference were planned at these Jour Fixes. The meetings were very useful to continually evaluate progress of work, and to maintain alignment of our respective research to the Sustainable Rural Transformation theme. Lisa Hoffmann and Peter Narh as co-convenors took turns to convene these meetings, which means that they initiated the agenda and led the proceedings, including liaising with the PIs and Directors of MIASA on issues for which their inputs were needed before the next meeting.

Weekly reading group

Each Tuesday of the Fellowship period was dedicated to a Fellows' reading group of key literature related to "Sustainable Rural Transformation". In these one-and-a half meetings, each Fellow provided and led discussions on key literature in their fields of expertise that could shape and inform our collective understanding of sustainable rural transformation in Africa. Over the four-months period, literature bearing on various themes including institutions and agrarian development in Africa, class dynamics of agrarian change in rural Africa, farmers as agents of rural innovation, herder and farmer conflicts over land and water, urbanisation and rural transformation, and technologies in African agriculture was discussed. The literature was treated as a useful framework towards a common understanding of sustainable rural transformation. The reading group contributed significantly to the ideas that Fellows presented at the IFG3 concluding conference as described below.

Bi-weekly methods group

In a regular "methods" group, IFG3 Fellows discussed different research methods in an internal seminar. Its aim was to exchange knowledge about different methods (i.e. quantitative or qualitative) in order to make use of the interdisciplinary composition of the group.

Seminar

A key element of the Fellowship was for each of the ten Fellows to present their own research in a weekly seminar series at the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at University of Ghana, taking place each Wednesday. Due to the closure of the University from March 2020 onwards, this seminar could not take place at the IAS. Instead, the seminars were organized as virtual internal seminars where the Fellows presented their research projects. Fellows' works as presented in these seminars focused on such themes as social conflict outcomes of large scale land acquisitions, socioeconomic impacts of poverty reduction policies in rural environments, conflicts and unorthodox conflict resolution mechanisms in rural areas, technologies and infrastructure in agriculture in Africa, urbanisation and rural transformation among others. Most of the issues presenters spoke on were developing ideas towards conceptualising and contributing academically to the IFG3 theme of sustainable rural transformation. Thus, convergence of the issues discussed was identified as key for the IFG3 Fellows to more concretely contribute to sustainable rural transformation. It is expected that such convergence would materialise in the MIASA Working Paper Series that would be published beyond the date of this report.

Concluding Conference

Together with the PIs, MIASA Directors, staff, and Fellows, the co-convenors organized the concluding IFG3 conference “Sustainable Rural Transformation in Africa” on 26 and 27 May 2020. Initially planned as an in-person, residential event, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the IFG3 to organise this conference virtually.

The conference was organized around two keynote speeches and four panels. Nine of the ten Fellows presented their papers in these panels.* Each presenter received extensive feedback from discussants (see below). The panels are summarized below:

Panels	Presenters	Discussants
Panel one: Internal mobility and rural transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Maya Turolla (with Lisa Hoffmann) ▪ Lothar Smith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prof. Joseph Kofi Teye (University of Ghana) and ▪ Prof. Issaka Kanton Osumanu (University for Development Studies, Ghana)
Panel two: Resource conflicts, violence and rural transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Melina Kalfelis ▪ Osman Alhassan) ▪ Ifeanyi Onwuzuruigbo* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prof. Gordon Crawford (Coventry University, UK)
Panel three: Large-scale land acquisitions and livelihoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Uchenna Efobi ▪ Evans Osabuohien ▪ Lisa Hoffmann 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prof. Jann Lay (German Institute for Global and Area Studies) ▪ Mr. Alhassan Karakara (University of Cape Coast, Ghana), and ▪ Dr. Sebastian Prediger (KfW, Germany)
Panel four: Environmental and resource impacts, technology, and agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Michael Jacobson ▪ Prince Osei-Wusu Adjei ▪ John Boateng, and ▪ Peter Narh 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prof. Christopher Gordon (University of Ghana), and ▪ Prof. Samuel Adjei-Nsiah (University of Ghana)

* Ifeanyi Onwuzuruigbo could not attend the conference due to his travel back to Nigeria.

MIASA Directors Prof. Abena Oduro and Prof. Gordon Crawford introduced the conference with short speeches on the role of MIASA in forging interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers in the Global South and North to bridge existing gaps. These were followed by two Keynote addresses by Prof. Ruth Hall from the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies, South Africa and Prof. Paris Yeros from the Federal University of ABC, Brazil. The Keynotes centred on factors shaping sustainable rural transformation in Africa, and on the development of labour reserves as outcomes of the economic and social transformation processes in Africa. The multi-faceted nature of rural transformation as highlighted in the keynote speeches meant that rural transformation is a dynamic process that requires an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach as adopted in MIASA for its appropriate conceptualisation and pursuit. The two IFG3 PIs, Apl. Prof. Jann Lay and Prof. Dzodzi Tsikata, gave short inputs after the keynote speeches and concluded the conference. Their speeches highlighted the possible convergence of the diverse views on rural transformation in Africa through a common conceptualisation of transformation, and the need to interrogate the role of the state in rural transformation in Africa.

98 participants registered for the conference, out of whom 56 took part on Day 1 and 48 took part on Day 2. Participants attended from more than ten countries, including from Burkina Faso, Columbia, Germany, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Netherlands, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United States. There were only minimal technical challenges and many of the participants provided useful comments and critical questions that no doubt would contribute in sharpening the various ideas IFG3 Fellows presented at the conference.

IFG3 outputs

Three key outputs were agreed on by IFG3:

MIASA Working paper series: The IFG3 concluding conference would result in a peer-reviewed working paper series to be authored by the Fellows, and published by MIASA. This series would thus be the third in the MIASA series, MIASA having already published the first and second series from the IFG1 and IFG2 sessions.

Conference paper: The Fellows agreed to write a joint conference paper summarizing the main discussions from the concluding conference. This paper consists of one section per panel, including some comparative analysis, context and a brief literature review to situate the papers in more general debates about rural transformation. Potentially, the conference paper could provide a basis for a Special Focus in *Africa Spectrum*.

Research collaborations: One of the key goals of MIASA is to encourage and support Fellows in the various IFGs to develop interdisciplinary research collaborations that would persist beyond MIASA. Thus, we hope that IFG3 Fellows maintain and nourish the collaborations they have formed in and across their various sub-working groups.

Conclusion: challenges of IFG3

Covid-19 broke out across the world in February and by mid-March Ghana had recorded cases. Consequently, MIASA closed all IFG3 residential meetings and supported all Fellows from abroad to fly back home. Most of the Fellows returned home as expected, except two colleagues who could not do so immediately. From 18 March, IFG3 resumed virtually. IFG3 meetings including the concluding conference were thus hosted on Cisco WebEx, which was set up by Lisa Hoffmann, the co-convenor

in Germany. Inasmuch as the Covid-19 was disruptive of most events, IFG3 managed to proceed successfully. The weekly seminars, Jour Fixe, Reading group, and other discussions went on successfully.

Yet, Fellows who had planned field research during the IFG3 period could not do so as physical interactions and movements were prohibited to contain the spread of the virus. Therefore, most Fellows had to rethink and adapt their planned research projects. Moreover, planned interactions in Ghana with relevant organisations and persons towards supporting the work of Fellows could not be held. Fellows who already conducted their field research before the virus outbreak worked with their field data.

Covid-19 also presented new opportunities: The IFG3 concluding conference was the first virtual conference for many Fellows. In view of this, and the continued commitment all Fellows put in to ensure the successful virtual running of IFG3, Fellows learnt a lot about organising work and events virtually. Moreover, the virtual conference allowed international participation while at the same time reducing the carbon footprint. Overall, while Covid-19 did affect IFG3 significantly, IFG3 managed to do the best possible to find new, innovative solutions.

Date: 15 June 2020

Signed: Peter Narh and Lisa Hoffmann