

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Factors and Actors Engaged in African Land Commoditization and How They Affect Communities in Northern Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

Increase in multiple demands for land in Africa has been affected by increased global food and energy requirements together with population growth. This has in turn led to large-scale acquisition of lands for agriculture by foreigners and wealthy local investors. Small holder farmers are at risk of losing their lands to the investors even if they receive government support. This often marginalizes the local people, undermines their livelihood and collides with the African indigenous tradition which sees land as a gift of God. As information on the factors and actors in land commoditization is inadequate and often withheld, one purpose of this paper is to identify these actors and factors. The Bolga Municipality is used as an example because it carries all the characteristics that can be found throughout most of Africa. Data was gathered using key informant interviews, focus discussion and secondary sources. The findings of the study reveal that people sell their lands because they need to pay school fees, to build and live in decent houses, to expense money for upholding the tradition of resplendently celebrating funerals, to raise funds for the dowry of a bride, and because owners of small land parcels are often unemployed. To solve all this, better information is needed as well as purposeful job-creation to decrease unemployment and socially adequate mortgages. As social cohesion depends on full inclusivity and accessibility for all who are affected by land deals, the government must take up the problem in a holistic manner.

**Keywords:** Commoditization; Africa; Indigenous Tradition; Land Transaction

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# 1. Introduction

Land means a lot to people in terms of their agricultural, economic, social, cultural, and religious activities. Whether in developed or in developing countries, people's livelihoods depend directly or indirectly on land. However, Muir, Smith, and Agrawal<sup>[1]</sup> state that access to arable productive land in Africa is on the decline due to the pressure of growing population trends and worsening land degradation which is caused by climate change. And population growth has led to the rush and conversion of small subsistence farmlands to large scale farms or to non-agriculture use by both local and foreign investors. The land which was initially held as a sacred inheritance is now a commodity that is exchanged for money. In the peri-urban areas where there is greater potential for high value crops, land acquisitions are characterized by many informal sales which exceed large scale acquisitions. In quite a few cases, the rich "elite" have taken advantage of the poor rural farmers and taken over their farms which denies them their sources of livelihoods. The farmers are enticed to enter ventures which make them lose ownership of their land: They are offered what they believe are short- or long-term financial gains. There are even instances, as Yaro<sup>[2]</sup> puts it, where the chiefs and earth priests claim that the traditional rights of land tenure entitle them to conclude land deals (a newfound elucidation of their competences which they use to "re-invent" custom). They sell off the lands to outsiders leaving the farmers without their sources of income. This is a provocative change in customary land tenure systems which has generated uncertainty and tension. The titleholders feel that their title and their responsibilities have become subject to interpretation by the elders who administer custom..

Another issue is purchase of land by foreigners. Large tracts of land in Africa as well as land rights of local people were taken over by foreigners who mainly exploit the produce - food and crops to be used as a source for energy - for sending it back to their home countries<sup>[3, 4]</sup>. But access to land and other natural resources are particularly very essential to the people of Africa<sup>[5, 6]</sup>.

Two thirds of agricultural land deals by foreign investors are in countries with serious hunger problems. Yet perversely, precious little of this land is being used

to feed people in those countries or go into local markets where it is desperately needed. Instead, the land is either being left idle, as speculators wait for its value to increase and then sell it at a profit, or it is predominantly used to grow crops for export, often for use as biofuels in Europe<sup>[7]</sup> – a sheer perversity of European environmentalists whose narrow perspective seems to only focus on decarbonization in their homelands.

Foreign investors, from 2008 on, expressed interest in approximately 56 million ha of land with agricultural potential worldwide<sup>[8]</sup>. However, what truly differentiates the newer trend of large-scale land acquisitions from those of the past is its connection to three major crises of the present decade: the global financial crisis, the food crisis, and the energy crisis<sup>[9]</sup>. According to Oxfam<sup>[7]</sup>, Africa has borne the brunt of this, with an area the size of Kenya acquired for agriculture by foreign investors in just ten years. The experience on other continents is similar. World Bank and IMF research has shown that most of the land being sold off is in the poorest countries with the weakest protection of people's land rights. Secure access to land and other natural resources is crucial for the achievement of what the World Food Summit Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals have postulated, and for the eradication of food insecurity and rural poverty because land is disproportionately valuable to poor households. The same goes for in situations where the offer of off-farm employment is insufficient<sup>[10]</sup>.

Holden<sup>[11]</sup> states that improved access to land can increase household food consumption and produce a surplus for sale in the market which helps to ensure household income and may improve the ability of a household to access credit. Secure access to land often provides a valuable safety net as a source of shelter, food, and income in times of hardship, and a family's land can be the last available resort in the instance of disaster. Apart from being important for food, the social and cultural identity of a people are tied to their land<sup>[12]</sup>.

There are two opposing opinions regarding the relationship between commoditization and living standards of people. One school of thought thinks commoditization can contribute to poverty alleviation, better livelihoods and food security<sup>[13]</sup>, while the over-

whelming opinion of others says it has deleterious implications on livelihoods and food security deepening rural poverty<sup>[14–17]</sup>.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Commoditization of Land

Governments of Africa have been encouraged to promote private sector participation in investment in land as a way of generating an increase in revenue from the sector in aid of plans aimed at rural development. Investors, in taking advantage of this development, have acquired huge tracts of land. And this is what can be assumed from many publications<sup>[16, 18, 19]</sup>.

The acquisition of lands on large-scale for agriculture by foreigners is attributed to growing economic relations between Africa and other nations of the world. The last decade witnessed the liberalization of economies, the globalization of transport and communications, and an increase in the requirement levels of the world's food, energy, and commodities and this has led to foreign countries investing in many African countries especially in the extractive industries and in agriculture for food and fuel<sup>[17, 18, 20]</sup>. This new development creates opportunities, challenges, and risks. The benefits may include GDP growth and an increase in government revenues, and the creation of opportunities for raising the living standards of the local people. Also, the presence of investors in poor countries that have relatively a lot of land, is likely to bring it capital, technology, know-how and market access and in a way cause economic development in rural areas. However, large-scale acquisition of land can lead to loss of local people's access to resources with implications on their food and livelihood security since these depend on their access to natural resource. As the land becomes commercialized, the other effects on natives may include the loss of land and heritage, loss of access to seasonal resources by non-resident groups such as pastoralists<sup>[21]</sup>. As the market value land increases, women and the other individuals in the communities who have no money to purchase land are marginalised. In the case where land acquisitions go with policy reforms, the effect might be more severe and might include contestations, strife, and struggles among different par-

ties<sup>[22]</sup>.

The problem of land grabbing is not peculiar to Ghana alone. Included in the list are countries such as Cameroon, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Mali, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zambia. It is believed that developing countries in general, and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, are targeted because of the perception that there is plenty of land available, a favourable climate for crop production, cheap local labour, and that the land is still relatively cheap<sup>[23–25]</sup>.

The past decade has recorded over 50 million hectares have leased or bought from individuals, communities, and governments to produce biofuels, food, forests resources, industrial goods, infrastructure, tourism, and livestock. The case is a global one, but Africa is very significant among the areas targeted as there are so many countries across the continent in which land deals have been carried out<sup>[26]</sup>. 422 concluded agricultural land deals (42% of all deals) and 10 million hectares, amounting to 37% of the deals have occurred on the African continent<sup>[26]</sup>. The overall situation requires that land acquisition, at least when reaching larger scales, should not be left to market forces alone. Protecting the interests of the poor must become a task for national governments, regional associations, and the international community. One starting point was the Principles on Responsible Agricultural Investment that were developed by FAO (<https://www.fao.org/3/ml291e/ml291e.pdf>) together with several international organizations. They were adopted in 2014, but progress of implementation has been very slow<sup>[27]</sup>. There are a few governments that deploy active land policies, with the main motivation being food security. Even though their main objective is directed towards the population in the investors' countries, there are some signs which show a certain degree of responsibility towards the target countries. For example, Gulf States, with scarce water and soil resources on which to grow food, but vast oil and cash reserves, have watched their dependence on food imports become increasingly uncertain and ever more expensive, their total food import bill ballooning from US\$ 8 billion to US\$ 20 billion from 2002 to 2007. So, they have moved quickly to extend control over food-producing lands abroad<sup>[28]</sup>.

Qatar, with only 1% of its land suitable for farming, has purchased 40,000 ha in Kenya for crop production and recently acquired holdings in Vietnam and Cambodia for rice production, and in Sudan for oils, wheat, and corn production. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), which imports 85% of its food, purchased 324,000 ha of farmland in the Punjab and Sindh provinces of Pakistan in June 2008. Daniel observed that other emerging nations such as China, Japan, and South Korea are also seeking to acquire land as part of a long-term strategy for food security<sup>[28]</sup>. A 2009 study titled “Land grab or development opportunity?” jointly produced by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), has analysed land acquisitions of 1000 hectares or more between 2004 and 2009 from four countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, and Mali. It documented an overall total of 2,492,684 ha of approved land allocations since 2004 in the five study countries, excluding allocations below 1000 ha<sup>[29]</sup>.

## **2.2. Factors and Actors in Land Commoditization**

Land commoditization is an inevitable reality the world over, and Ghana is no exception. The phenomenon of land grabbing has been increasingly described by the media as a growing trend across all continents, most notably in Africa<sup>[30]</sup>. However, De Schutter<sup>[30]</sup> and Cotula et al.<sup>[29]</sup> declare that land deals reported in the international press and which enter statistics, only constitute a tip of the iceberg. The factors affecting the commercialization of land are said to be rapid growth of economies in both the developing and developed countries, introduction of new technologies, market expansion, market liberalization, urbanization, rapid increase of demand for food, decreasing of farming population, liberalized and open economic policies, bilateral and multilateral economic agreements, developed infrastructure facilities in farming areas and government agricultural policies<sup>[13, 22, 31]</sup>.

But land has never been a mere commodity throughout the history of mankind. Land is considered a primary source of wealth as well as the foundation

for shelter, food, and other economic activities. Particularly, land is the most significant provider of employment opportunities in rural areas. Given that in northern Ghana like many communities in Sub-Saharan African, much of the population live in rural areas countries, access to land for rural livelihoods is very crucial<sup>[32]</sup>. In Ghana the poor rural inhabitants derive their livelihoods from a number of diverse on-farm sources. These on-farm sources of income include income earned from the sale of farm crops, livestock, and other natural resources. These land-based livelihoods are critical to the survival and health of most rural households, particularly the very poor<sup>[17, 33]</sup>. The UN in 1976, realizing the importance of land to development, reiterates that land cannot be treated as an ordinary asset, controlled by individuals and subject to the pressures and inefficiencies of the market. Private land ownership is also a principal instrument of accumulation and concentration of wealth and therefore contributes to social injustice; if unchecked, it may become a major obstacle in the planning and implementation of development schemes. The provision of decent dwellings and healthy conditions for the people can only be achieved if land is used in the interests of all of society. Public control of land use is therefore indispensable<sup>[34]</sup>. But all along, land dispossession of smallholder farmers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, and other rural communities, has been a continuous process over centuries of foreign and internal colonization, as well as post-independence ‘land grabbing’. Abebe adds<sup>[28]</sup> that the various political and economic factors peculiar to Sub-Saharan Africa have compounded the implications of land grabs in the region. Apart from increase in population and the growing desire of people to own land a surging demand was built up for agrofuels (biofuel produced from ethanol and sugarcane as well as biodiesel). This together with the quest for new raw materials from which to manufacture various goods is a new driver of land purchases. With biofuels, for example, the US Renewable Fuel Standard aims to increase ethanol use by 3.5 billion gallons between 2005 and 2012, and the European Union’s aim was to increase the proportion of biofuels used in land transport to 10% by 2020<sup>[28]</sup>. The source further argues that another factor fuelling land grab is the hunger of investors who have identified farm-

land as an important investment which is posed to produce significant returns. He asserts that many Western investors including Wall Street banks and wealthy individuals have, since 2008, turned their attention to agricultural acquisitions.

Land commoditization is also driven urbanization and the demand for residential facilities<sup>[35]</sup>. The population of towns and cities have greatly increased leading to their expansion into adjoining rural areas which caused sharp declines in farming businesses. Development agencies and think tanks such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) realize that there have been extremely negative consequences associated with the recent surge of land grabbing: the displacement of local populations; a reduction in food security; environmental damage; loss of livelihoods; social polarization and political instability. These agencies have also identified the secretive manner land deals are often conducted as the investors chose to target countries with weak land tenure rights<sup>[13, 36, 37]</sup>. Land grabbing directly interferes with the right to feed oneself. Land grabbing forecloses the lands taken from landless or land-scarce communities who could make alternative and better use of the resource. In the future, national policy decisions will be needed to make land available (again) for local food production by and for the local communities and for the nearby urban areas. This will have to face the well-known difficulties of expropriating large-scale lands for the benefit of landless communities – especially where these lands are not used productively. But there is the danger that the foreign owners will seek recourse from bilateral investment treaties or trade regulations that prevent national government from implementing such policies. The question is how to balance this with governments' obligations to facilitate people's access to food resources<sup>[38]</sup>.

The World Bank believes that privatisation of land rights has the potential to contribute to poverty alleviation through three mechanisms: payments for the lease and purchase of land; generating employment for wage-

workers; and new opportunities for contract farmers<sup>[13]</sup>. But on the contrary, what is reported in many communities in countries of Africa is not what the World Bank envisioned. We see displacement of farmers, and pastoralists, depletion of rural livelihoods, changes in institutions as well as in gender and power relations, food insecurity and increase in conflicts<sup>[4, 39–41]</sup>.

Speculation is said to be the greatest challenge of the global land grab. Whether it is a large-scale land transaction by foreign investors for agricultural production, or '(trans) national commercial land transactions', the purely commercial motive mostly overrides any other consideration, irrespective of scale and markets<sup>[4, 42]</sup>. Land grabbing or commercialization land acquisitions referred to as commoditization of land in the context of this paper means taking custody of and/or controlling a scale of land which is disproportionate in size in comparison to average land holdings. The lease/purchase of the land could be for any purpose, but in all cases, there are implications for livelihood security. The Upper East Region of Ghana has suffered significantly from all these features.

The perpetuation of land commoditization by foreign investors is now a known fact. But what is new, is that illegitimate, or at least improper, foreign land deals may only be a small part of the 'commercialization of land'. More significantly, in many cases, land commercialization is carried out by a national and local upper class, which competes with land users (pastoralists, crop farmers), and which incites land grabs within families, where men take over lands from women, in a lot of cases from poor widows and their children. Hence, focusing only on large-scale land acquisitions by foreigners can divert attention from more serious 'land grabbing' in some societies.

If the land has both cultural and social significance and the lives of people depend so much on it, the question must be asked why they part with such an important resource. Who are the faces behind the transactions? And why is it that the direct dependence on agriculture for the livelihood of a majority in rural Africa (three out of every four poor people as per the 2008 World Development Report)<sup>[43]</sup> is overlooked in national and international policymaking? If this continues, the large popu-

lation of unemployed rural and urban youth in all Africa (of which the Upper East Region of Ghana is an exemplary case) will lose their livelihoods and all prospects of personal development as the days go by. It is against this background that our paper contributes to new strives for better and more holistic policies.

Our paper, by investigating the key factors and actors in land transaction and commoditization in the Upper East Region would reveal the root cause of the problem: What accounts for the inadequate information on factors and unclear identification of actors in the transaction and commoditization of land in the Upper East Region of Ghana?

### 3. The Study Area – Bolgatanga Municipality

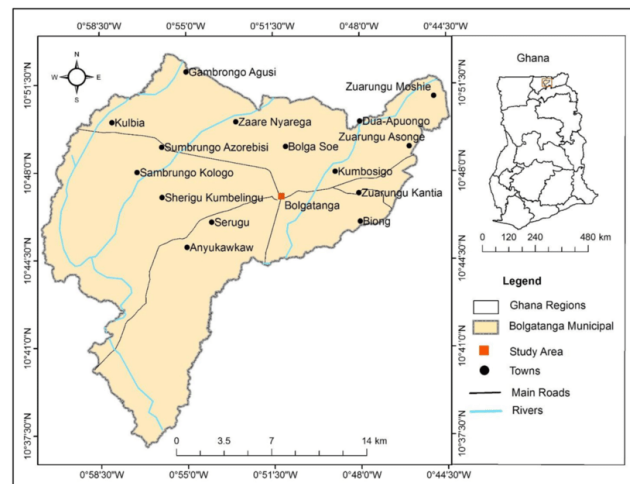
The Bolgatanga Municipal Assembly with its capital Bolgatanga was established by a Legislative Instrument (LI) 1797 of 2004. Bolgatanga is also the capital town of the Upper East Region. The Municipality, which is the largest urban centre of the region forms part of the fifteen (15) districts and municipalities in the region. The Municipality is bordered to the North by the Bongo District, to the East by the Nabdam District, to the South by the Talensi District and to the West by the Kassena Nankana East District. The Administrative capital is Bolgatanga. The municipality has a total land area of 729 sq km. Bolgatanga Township consists of suburbs such as Daporetidongo, Tanzui, Atulbabisi, Bolga-Soe, and Zaare. Others include Yikene, Dulugu, Kumbosco, and Tindonmoligo, which are all peri-urban in nature. Bolgatanga is the biggest settlement. The Municipal Assembly Area has about 182 towns and villages, and the settlement pattern is predominantly rural (about 95 percent) with dispersed buildings, which render service location extremely difficult.

In the last Population and Housing Census, the population of the Municipality stood at 131,550 with a population growth rate of 1.2% and a population density of 142.2 persons per square kilometre. The population was comprised of 62,783 males (47.7%) and 68,767 females (52.3%). But it increased much faster: to 139,864 with 66,607 males and 73,257 females<sup>[44]</sup>. Ethnically, the

largest group is the Gurune people.

According to the 2020 ministry of finance composite budget of the municipality, agriculture is the main economic activity in the Municipality. This is done on a subsistence basis and employs about 57% of the people. The major crops that are cultivated by the people of the municipality are millet, sorghum, maize, rice, groundnuts, cowpea, sweet potato, and soya beans. Also, tomatoes, pepper and onions are cultivated on a large scale. The animals that are reared include cattle, goats, sheep, poultry, donkey, and pigs but on a subsistence level (See: <https://mofep.gov.gh/sites/default/files/composite-budget/2020/UE/Bolgatanga.pdf> (Accessed 14 February 2025)).

Below is a map of Bolgatanga municipality showing its communities or subsections (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1.** Map of Bolgatanga municipality in the Upper East region of Ghana.

#### 3.1. Land Tenure and Governance in the Bolgatanga Municipality

In line with the rest of the country, the Bolgatanga Municipality practices a dual land governance system, statutory and customary. Customarily, the Tindaana (Earth Priest) is recognized as the custodian and the allodial title holder of land in Bolgatanga. He is said to be the descendant of the first settler on the land and by custom has right of ownership over the land<sup>[45–47]</sup>. Tribal chiefs, because of their social and political status and the recognition which they receive from the public from long before the colonial era, also have authority on land, but

this is limited<sup>[48, 49]</sup>.

The various recognised interests in land in the municipality like other parts of the country include the allodial title, common law freehold or customary law freehold, usufructuary interests, leasehold interest, and customary tenancy. As per the Land Act of 2020, the allodial title is the highest interest<sup>[50]</sup>. In the Upper East region, the chief, Tindaana, clan head, family head are authorities in charge of the management of skin-, or clan- or family-land. They are fiduciaries charged with the obligation to discharge the management function for the benefit of the skin, or clan or family concerned, and are accountable as fiduciaries<sup>[50]</sup>.

Customarily land is owned by male members of the family, but women can access land through their relationship the men – father, brother, uncle, and husband<sup>[51, 52]</sup>. They have access but not ownership. What this means is that women are allowed to use the land, but they tend to sell this right or to enter into contract with another party on the usage of the land since they do not control the land. The other parties often dictate their terms. So, ownership and control of land is a preserve of men<sup>[53]</sup>. The explanation for the exclusion of women is that they do not sacrifice to the Earth God<sup>[51]</sup>, and even though they belong to their husband's family, the family regards them as strangers who cannot be trusted with their land<sup>[54]</sup>.

### 3.2. Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study. Qualitative research allows a researcher to explore and understand the “meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”<sup>[18, 55]</sup>. Since the study needed to capture the meaning that people ascribe to commoditization, a qualitative approach was the best fit.

The research mainly relied primary data, but a review of books, journal articles, magazines and internet sources that had information on the subject matter was also carried out. Secondary data from census reports were reviewed to for an initial picture of the situation of the target group. The best format for enabling local people to analyse their living conditions and to share the outcomes is Participatory Rural Appraisal<sup>[56]</sup>. This tool was

used in conjunction with key informant interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

Purposive sampling was employed in the selection of research participants. The sampling technique was used because of the nature of the study and the need for people who knew the subject matter and who could answer the research questions<sup>[55]</sup>. The sampling technique was employed in two communities, Atulbabiisi (urban) and Zaare (peri-urban). The locations, presence of land sales and the evidence of the effects on the community were the criteria used for the sampling. Two communities, one urban and the other peri-urban were purposively selected. Three key informants (chiefs, Earth Priests and community members of the assembly) from each of the selected communities, and participants of the focus group discussion numbering twelve (eight men and four women) were also purposively interviewed. The members of the focus group discussion consisted of land agents, landowners and people who had sold land. The discussion allowed each of these actors to share their perspectives on the subject matter. They discussed the actors, factors, and implications of land sales on communities and their people.

Data were analysed concurrently with data collection as respondents were asked to scrutinise the situation during the interviews. The involvement of participants in the subsequent analysis of data leads to community control and ownership of information<sup>[55]</sup>.

## 4. Findings and Discussions from the Study

This section has two parts: A first part presents the outcomes of the key informants' interviews as well as the feedback from the focus groups. In the second part, the authors will mirror this in the socio-political environment of the topic.

### 4.1. Analysis of the Informants' Statements

#### *(a) Understanding of land commoditization*

According to the respondents, land was free, historically, but the infiltration of 'foreigners' or non-natives seeking land for residential and commercial purposes makes indigenes see this as an opportunity to make

money, resulting in the sale of lands. Land sales are so rampant in local communities that their outcomes are obvious to members. Responses from participants on their understanding of land commoditization included *'land having a monetary value; land becoming an item for sale just like items on the market; land becoming something we can sell when we want to, and making the land which initially was free and an important resource an item for sale just like salt or pepper in the market'*. It is assumed among the Gurune people that salt and pepper are the commonest and cheapest commodity in the market. This comparison goes to show how common and rampant the sales are. One respondent lamented: *"The sales are now too serious. Some for good reasons but others are not. Can you imagine selling a piece of land to someone to build a 'block house' when you cannot even get a common laterite house for yourself after the sales? That is not good enough. Some people use the proceeds from the sale of the land on alcohol and women"*.

One of the communities that was chosen for the interviews, Atulbabiisi, is in the heart of Bolgatanga town. It houses one of Bolga's major markets, business stores, businesses, offices including the Post office, some schools, banks, hotels, the catholic church, a big mosque, as well as residences of both locals and non-locals are on the land. The other community, Zaare, has the regional hospital, nursing and doctors' residences, some basic schools, the girls' senior high school and some government office buildings and most of this land was compulsorily acquired by the government. The land seems to have so many buildings on it that not much land is left. But because of its location, the few lands left is in high demand and so land is moving from agriculture to non-agriculture purposes. The rate of commoditization of land varies from place to place, depending on location, urban or rural or its nearness to certain important facilities. And that is the fate of this urban community. As earlier stated, within the culture of the Gurune people, land is not sold, and there are many who still hold to this value in the face of modernity and commoditization. It is expected that people will only make money from a piece of land under urgent and very important situations when it is considered that there is no other remedy. However, from the responses it does not appear that people follow

the culture and the expectations of society with regards on when to put a piece of land on the market. There are cases of people giving the land to persons who they think will put it to a profitable use such as a residential home/a business, or to a bank who will use it for higher gains in the future. In their own view, the old landowners waste their property on what the community terms as unimportant. They are made to believe this, as Yaro alluded to (see: [2]), and are lured into ventures where they lose their lands and livelihoods because of the short term benefits they gain through the disposal. The proceeds when it is not put to good use or a good investment, soon finishes and they are worse off than before.

### **(b) Factors that drive the commoditization of land**

There was a chieftaincy (political) conflict in neighbouring Bawku which caused many people from that area to migrate to settle in Bolga. From there, the demand for land for residential and business purposes rose, and this has led to an increase in the cost of land within the municipality and in Bolga Township in particular. A plot of land was sold for about ten thousand Ghana cedis (roughly 850 USD at the time), according to one respondent, which was meant to be a good bargain. The land could even be more expensive than that in places where there are pipelines and electricity.

The findings have it that the factors that drive the sale of land in the municipality vary but include the need for families to pay school fees of children, especially when they get to levels in education where the fees are high; then there is people's desire to build and live in decent houses and roofing them with iron roofing sheets or replacing their thatch roofs with iron roof sheets. It is seen as unfashionable to still have a thatch roof on one's house. An individual or family with such a roof is seen in the community as being among the poorest and suffers some mockery. Other identified factors driving commoditization of land include population growth, poverty, the need to acquire property such as a motor bike (mostly by the youth) or to perform 'befitting' funerals, to finance the dowry of a wife, or to solve conflicts. And there are 'forced' sales. Among the indigenous people of Bolgatanga, grooms and their families are expected to give the bride's family some cattle (could be 2



or 3) and some small ruminants as dowry during marriages. Usually, the bride joins her husband before this is demanded. In some instances, failure to meet the demands of the in-laws could make them take the bride back home until the request is granted. Families may resort to selling the land to meet this demand as it is considered a shame to allow one's wife to be taken away due to nonpayment of the dowry.

It was pointed out in the interviews that degraded lands were likely to be disposed of since farming them would not bring the desired yields. The farmers usually do not have the resources to improve the fertility of the lands. The lands are disposed of, and according to the respondents, the proceeds are put into a more viable venture. A respondent from Atulbabiisi had this to say, *"You see where the Bolga new market is? Some of our people had their farms there. They used to get a lot of yields but after a while, they had to abandon the lands because the yields were now too low. So, when the assembly came asking for the land to put up a new market, they saw it as an opportunity to dispose of it"*.

During discussions participants explained that sometimes the lands that are given out for 'free' as required by custom are later sold by the second "owner" after the death of the giver (actual owner). In this case the children of the original owner, in order to enjoy any benefit, are forced to agree to the sale so that they do not entirely lose. Also lands that were seen as source of conflict are sold out to avoid further conflicts.

It was also explained that lands were given free for farming purposes, but people now want the land for other uses such as siting of businesses and construction of buildings which are more permanent. Since it is not possible to get the land back it is only right to take money in exchange for it. A respondent in the group said, *"We have realized that when our fathers gave the land for free to their friends, these friends later sold the land and are wealthier now, so we will not give out lands for free again, we have to get money for it"*.

From the findings, the main underlying causes of land sales in the municipality are poverty and unemployment. The municipality is in the Northern part of the country, and unlike southern Ghana which has two raining seasons, it has one short raining season which is

May/June – September/October, with 800 mm and 1,100 mm of rain, and long spell of dry season, which is November – mid February<sup>[44]</sup>. The soil is degraded and requires a lot of input to get good produce or yields. Apart from the economically endowed farmers, many of whom are commercial farmers, most dwellers are unable to make the needed investment for good yield. Thus, the land is not fertile enough to feed the family all year round let alone sell part of the produce to acquire other family needs. Many individuals therefore resort to selling portions of their lands to take care of their pressing needs, although our findings also show that some might sell the land for insignificant reasons.

### ***(c) The actors involved in land transactions and commoditization***

It was revealed that the actors in land transactions and commoditization include the landowner who is selling the land, the family head, the Tindaana (Earth Priest) and the buyers. Some land belongs to the clan and the clan heads have oversight authority over them. There are also lands belonging to individuals (individual landowners). If the land to be bought belongs to a clan, then the buyers will need to see the head who will in turn inform his younger brothers about it. He also shares the proceeds with them.

It was also revealed that the Tindaana is an important actor or player in the land transaction. He is the spiritual head of the land, and all land directly or indirectly belongs to him. The Tindaama (plural) within the Bolga area sign the land documents when lands are sold. The respondent however revealed that some areas within the Bolga Municipality have no Tindaama (Zaare, Yorogo, Sumburungu) and so the chiefs do the signing.

When asked about the position of the chief in land issues, a respondent had this to say, *"chiefs are for the people not the land"*, and they should not be considered as actors in the transaction. Most local communities of the Gurune people have two key traditional leaders, the Tindaana and the chief. This has to do with a cultural position where the Tindana in many cases is the descendant of the first settler and is considered the owner of the land, whereas the chief is not considered to own the land. He is supposed to administer to the people. There are some instances where the chief is an overall

landowner, but he mostly owns just his family land. The chief at times is said to be a stranger who was asked by the Tindana to take care of the people while he attends to the spiritual matters of the land. This often happened in colonial times; the imposition of chief in these non-centralised or acephalous communities is to blame for a lot of the confusion that was created<sup>[49]</sup>. In the face of commoditization, the issue of who owns the land or who among them should be considered the actor in the transaction process has become a source of conflict in recent times in many communities.

There are land agents within the Bolga Zone who are very important in the land transaction process. They form the link between the landowners and the buyers. Landowners do not know where the buyers are, neither do the buyers know where the lands are. The agent's responsibility is to link them. He is sometimes the first point of contact for buyers. Agents are contacted by landowners to help them advertise and sell their lands. The agents sell the land at a higher price than what the owner is seeking for, thus making some money for themselves. Another important actor in land transaction according to the respondents is the Government. The government is an active player in land transactions since a lot of lands are acquired by government for development projects.

#### 4.2. Positioning the Respondents' Opinions into the Socio-Political Environment

From the findings, respondents did not have a clear stand or position about commoditization of land or the sale of land. The results have it that commoditization could be beneficial or detrimental depending on what happens to the money that accrued from the sale of land. "It will in a particular situation be beneficial if the money is put into a venture that is profitable. Otherwise, the individual has lost it all." Apart from the proceeds not being used for beneficial purposes, the effects land sales and takeover of lands by strangers and migrants on their culture also came up.

*"You sell land to a stranger and when he settles near you, he now wants to dictate to you how you should live your life. For instance,*

*some want to change our culture; they do not want us to drum during funerals – that we are disturbing them. Is that good?" – (A man from the group discussion).*

*"If a landlord sells all the land around his own house, when he dies, how will his body be taken round the house as tradition demands?" – (A woman from the group discussion).*

The second group held the opinion that land sales promote development as it encourages 'strangers' to settle on their lands and to help build them their community. The group held the view that commoditization had the ability to reduce poverty leading to the building of better houses and ownership of other forms of property.

*"Commoditization is not entirely bad; it creates development and expands the town. But when the money is finished the landowners have nowhere to turn to. Land is leased for 99 years for residential and 50 years for commercial purposes, and that is so much time."*

The view of the research participants reflects that of the scholars whose opinion on commoditization of land is divided (see the Literature Review above). However, unlike the academics who have fixed positions, the respondents did not. They acknowledged that commoditization of land is detrimental to landowners but in situations where they are compelled to dispose of the land for money to solve some very important or serious problems such as treatment of illness, payment of school fees etc., it could be of benefit to the family or individuals if the proceeds from the sale is used for that purpose.

The findings revealed that farming is seen as unattractive and less profitable by the youth. And so, some tend to sell off the land to put the money into ventures they deem more profitable. This will have implications not only for food security, but for the availability of land for future generations. But land should be considered a property owned by those dead, by the living and by those yet to be born (Ollenu, 1962). If the living sells

it to meet their needs of today, those yet to be born will be deprived of the ability to own the land.

**Strategies to ensure synergy between land-security and commoditization for enhanced livelihood security**

Some respondents wanted the lease period of land to be reduced from 99 years to 15 or 10 years while others felt a 50-year lease period was more realistic. The group was of the view that after the 50-year period there should be a re-negotiation between the landowner and buyer to fix a new price. This, they believe, will better benefit landowners than the 99-year lease period, which in their opinion is almost a permanent purchase. And, to them, land should be rented out and not sold out right.

Respondents suggested that owners of land should be allowed to lease lands in their own names with conditions that will favour them. For example, if the land is acquired for a commercial purpose building a bank, the landowner could have an agreement with the bank so that some jobs could be given to members of their family so that their livelihoods are not totally lost when the land is sold.

Another suggestion was that the traditional leaders who administer the land should set up a committee to deal with issues regarding the sale of land. This committee should always interview a seller (landowner) to ensure that the sale is necessary and legal. The leaders should ensure that the reason for which the landowner is selling the land is well investigated and established before signing any of the documents relating to that land. The respondents hold the opinion that land should be given out for beneficial purposes such as farming and not for quarrying.

Respondents gave the following as the profile of the actors in land transactions and the driving force towards commoditization of land in the research area (**Tables 1 and 2**).

**Profile of Actors**

Respondents blame communities' engagement in land sales on the lack of employment opportunities and poverty. They stated that there are some instances that due to poverty, some individuals are compelled to dispose of the land as a last resort for the payment of school fees, medical bills, and dowries. They feel if farming

is more productive, farmers will be able to meet these needs without having to sell their lands. They therefore called on government and non-governmental organisations to help farming communities to improve yields, make farming a viable business that gives farmers a decent living. Others believed the land is now small, and population is large, government should therefore create jobs to employ people so that they do not continue to solely depend on the land.

What can be gleaned from the interviews exhibits some type of disproportion between what the community people express and the factual circumstances: The current trajectories of development in Africa with modernization of many sectors in the economy and not the least in agribusiness would point to (forced) land commodification becoming a concept that is losing relevance. Land commodification is not entirely 'evil' as it can be reconciled, in several ways, with the resilience of custom on land. One example is the chieftaincy conflict in Bawku community where the influx of migrants caused land dispositions – but, in the end, one might say that what was seen as unwelcome intrusion and acts by external players turned into changes of land use from which all parties benefitted.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Commoditization of land has caused a lot of harm to Northern Ghana in particular, and to Ghana as a whole. The study however reveals that land commoditization is not entirely 'evil'. *"Commoditization is not entirely bad; it creates development and expands the town. But when the money is finished the landowners have nowhere to turn to. Land is leased for 99 years for residential purposes and 50 years for commercial purposes and that is so much time"* (Opinion leader, Atulibabiisi).

The paper has contributed to the existing literature by revealing on-the-ground opinion regarding the actors and factors. While the issue of land-commoditization is a very important one, there is very little research on the topic that would reveal the background and the outcomes in a specific region like in the Upper East Region of Ghana. We hope that our analysis can serve as a model

**Table 1.** Actors in the land transaction process in Bolgatanga Municipality.

ACTOR	ROLE(S)
Landowners	They have the lands for sale.
Clan heads	They oversee clan lands and sometimes sell them
Tindaana	He is the owner of the entire land. He signs the land documents.
Chief	He is the leader of the people. Owns the land in some cultures and signs the land documents.
Land Agents	Leases large tracts of land for developmental projects.
Family heads	They link landowners to buyer.
	Members of the family informed of land sales and may sometimes intervene if sale is not thought to be beneficial.

**Table 2.** Actors and the driving forces towards land commoditization.

ACTOR	DRIVING FACTOR (S)
Chief	Prevents conflicts in their communities, including land related conflicts. Financial benefit from sales.
Tindaana (land priest)	Ensures spiritual links with the ancestors are maintained. Financial benefit from sales.
Family head	Desires to prevent conflict. Ensure that land transactions carried out by family is legal and beneficial.
Agent	Financial benefit
Witness	Desire to prevent future conflict
Government	Ensure that contracts entered into by the parties are kept. To prevent conflicts To ensure security of citizens Financial benefit

for more research in this area.

We are not aware that the governmental policies on land issues are interlinked with labour policies. But creating jobs to reduce poverty can certainly minimize the sale of land for the purpose of just gaining money.

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Conceptualization, methodology and field research by H.A.-A. Otherwise: all authors shared in the text, the references, and the review process. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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All data is fully transparent and all data supporting the results and analysis of this study are reflected in the article and nowhere else.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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