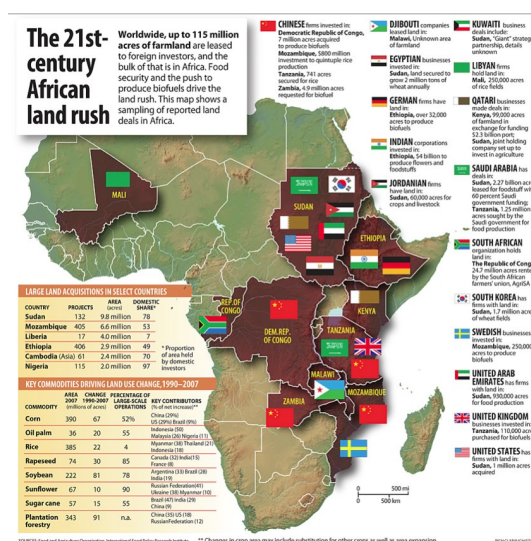


# Terra Nullius and Land Grabs

In Romanus Pontifex, on January 8, 1455, Pope Nicolas V granted Portugal a perpetual monopoly to trade with Africa, which included the right “...-- to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed...” and to “...**reduce their persons to perpetual slavery**”.

By issuing this divine command, the Vatican set the tone for contemporary Terra Nullius discourse. To this day, this legacy is visible in justification for what is referred to as ‘land grabbing’ throughout the world, particularly in Africa.

The past several decades have witnessed an unprecedented increase of foreign large-scale land acquisitions or ‘[land grabs](#)’. Huge tracts of land of peasant farmers and pastoralists are being leased by powerful commercial and state interests controlled by investors from Gulf sheikdoms, agribusiness conglomerates, Indian and Chinese public and para-public corporations, Wall Street and City speculators. Such lands are converted to intensive agriculture, production of biofuels, biodiversity conservation (‘green grabbing’), tourism, [mining and infrastructure projects](#).



These transboundary actors argue that developing countries insufficiently develop their land. They argue, for example, that the livelihoods of the small-scale farmers and pastoralists are holding up world food production. The lands occupied by these communities are often described as “empty”, “unoccupied” or “underutilized”, when they are homelands that have been occupied for thousands of years. One common argument is that food is a global commodity, and that everybody has the right to food security, which entitles them to lease millions of hectares of land and ship food produced on those lands back to their own countries while people in production countries suffer from chronic hunger and deprivation. Other outside stakeholders such as conservation NGO’s say they are saving the world for biodiversity with their nature, conservation and climate mitigation schemes. Despite their deep knowledge of their ancestral homelands, local people are deprived of a voice because they are deemed uneducated by Western standards.

In essence, these developments are a carbon copy of what happened centuries ago during the era of discovery when the papal bulls allowed outsiders to confiscate land in the name of God. The implied truth that some lifestyles are superior to others can be heard in these ‘land grab’ discourses, such as the recent remarks of an Ethiopian minister when defending an agricultural project that would displace thousands of pastoralists:

“Some lifestyles just aren’t worth preserving.”

Just as indigenous groups experienced in the Age of Discovery, people who have followed traditional ways of working their lands for hundreds, sometimes thousands of years, are shunted aside, and are allowed little or no say on their fates. They feel invisible and are left on the margins, voiceless, landless and isolated.