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The Global Land Grab

A primer

What is land grabbing?

The term 'land grabbing' re-emerged on the international stage in the context of a spike in global food prices in 2007-2008. The media spotlight was initially focused on new players like Saudi Arabia and South Korea potentially acquiring vast areas of land in developing nations like Madagascar and Ethiopia to grow food for their own people amidst a fear of food scarcity. Prominent international development think-tanks helped to reinforce this framing.[1]

Today, however, several years down the road, it is clear that this framing of land grabbing has obscured more than it was able to illuminate. It is important to unpack what land grabbing really involves if we are to understand what is really happening.

A better way to start to understand land grabbing is through the lens of political economy. From this perspective, land grabbing is essentially control grabbing. It refers to the capturing of power to control land and other associated resources like water, minerals or forests, in order to control the benefits of its use. That is, the project 'to fix or consolidate forms of access to land-based wealth.'[2] This can include 'virtual land grabs' where "behind a façade of land acquisition for a stated purpose, there lies an agenda to appropriate subsidies, obtain bank loans using land permits as collateral, or to speculate on future increases in land values."[3] Whether 'virtual' or 'real', land grabbing is inherently political, since what is at stake is the power to decide how the land and water can be used now and in the future. From this perspective, land grabs that are made more transparent are, in the end, still land grabs.

Land grabbing needs to be seen in the context of the power of national and transnational capital and their desire for profit, which overrides existing meanings, uses and systems of management of the land that are rooted in local communities. The global

land grab is therefore an epitome of an ongoing and accelerating change in the meaning and use of the land and its associated resources (like water) from small-scale, labour-intensive uses like subsistence agriculture, toward large-scale, capital-intensive, resource-depleting uses such as industrial monocultures, raw material extraction, and large-scale hydropower generation – integrated into a growing infrastructure that link extractive frontiers to metropolitan areas and foreign markets.[4]

The irony is that focusing too much on the land itself risks overlooking the key drivers of the global land grab which is the underlying logic and operation of capital and the biophysical requirements of capital accumulation.

Problems of current definitions of land grabbing

There are many problems with current definitions of land grabbing, which usually take the following forms:

Focus on exchange of land ownership rather than who controls the land:
Land grabbing is usually portrayed as an illegitimate seizure of land from a person or people that leads to their expulsion from the land. Yet in some cases peasants remain on the land which is seized even though they have effectively lost control of it. In another example, some governments have seized land for redistribution to others, often as a result of popular demands for fairer sharing of national resources. Is this land grabbing? It is better to talk about control of land, and look at who is benefiting and isn't from land deals than just talk about 'grabbing' *per se.*

Focus on scale rather than impact. The description of the new wave of land grabbing often refers to large-scale grabs, of tens of thousands of hectares for example, but how is threshold set and what about the many grabs that are less than 10,000 hectares?

Focus on process, emphasising how land grabs violate principles of transparency and accountability. Some observers defined land grabbing as deals which lack free, prior and informed consent by land-users, do not include socio-environmental impact assessments, and are carried out corruptly and without proper democratic participation. But if companies or governments claim that the desirable formal principles and technical procedures were upheld, which many do, then is it no longer a land grab? Given that assessing adherence to principles is a matter of degree and perception, how are we to judge the threshold between an illegitimate land acquisition and a proper one?

What ideological myths sustain large-scale land investments?

The first myth that underpins land grabbing is that there is an availability of excess land which with investment can be turned into income and jobs for developing countries. Worldwide the areas being targeted for this kind of large-scale investment are being portrayed on paper as 'empty', 'marginal', 'idle' or 'degraded' land, largely unpopulated, unused, unproductive, and unlikely to compete with local food production. The World Bank has been key to sustaining this myth, declaring the existence of a vast 'reserve' of potentially 'suitable' land – to the tune of between 445 million and 1.7 billion hectares worldwide. This of course sent a loud positive signal to potential investors that the world's resources are up for grabs. Yet the reality is that the land is not empty, idle, or unused; and many investors are going for prime — not marginal or degraded — land.

The second myth is that agriculture needs investment, particularly foreign investment. Juergen Voegele, director of the Agricultural and Rural Development Department of the World Bank argues this saying: "[W]hen done right, larger-scale farming can provide opportunities for poor countries with large agricultural sectors and ample endowments of land. To make the most of these opportunities, however, countries will need to better secure local land rights and improve land governance. Adopting an open and proactive approach to dealing with investors is also needed to ensure that investment contributes to broader development objectives."[5]

The assumption is that the ongoing rural crisis of persistent chronic poverty and widespread hunger is at base a crisis of lack of investment. Therefore the current upswing of big-investor interest in land is portrayed as a must-seize opportunity. Moreover, advocates have said that the investment will need to be large-scale and corporate-controlled in order to be capable of achieving higher international competitive abilities in the increasingly integrated value chains of global agricultural production.[6]

The reality of world food provision and agricultural investment, however is that the bulk of investment in agriculture is undertaken by farmers themselves, with smallholder farmers producing most of the food consumed locally in many developing regions.[7] In Zimbabwe for example, small-scale farmers are using their own savings to invest in on-farm buildings, farm equipment, cattle and transport. In Latin America, the agro-ecology movement is sharing the benefits of this low-external input agriculture through a farmer-to-farmer process of knowledge exchange and innovation. In the EU and US, food re-localisation strategies connect producers, retailers, and consumers in the exchange of healthy, nutritious, locally sourced food, outside the reach of transnational supermarket chains. These are just a few examples of positive alternative investments

to the large-scale, capital intensive, corporate controlled agricultural model, which presents itself as the only solution to world hunger and rural poverty.

The third powerful myth is that large-scale land deals are necessary to deal with scarcity – first food-scarcity and then oil-scarcity - which exploits environmental protection concerns in the context of climate change. Advocates stressed the need to develop alternative non-fossil fuel-derived, renewable energy sources that could overcome the problem of 'peak oil' to achieve higher levels of energy security, while still, at the same time, combat climate change through 'greener' fuels.

But both of these scarcity arguments oversimplify complex realities. They conveniently reduce the problem to mere supply, in order to make the 'solution' of increasing production through investment in unsustainable methods seem more acceptable.

'Food-scarcity' arguments in favour of large-scale land grabs fail under close examination. They fail to acknowledge that there is already more than enough food in the system to feed everyone, and that food security is undermined by costs, loss of harvests, waste and the diversion of land to production of non-food industrial products, such as feed and fuel (agrofuel), fibre, flowers and 'forests' – e.g., industrial tree plantations for pulp, timber, woodchips and rubber.

'Oil-scarcity' arguments likewise fail on two counts. First, they do not acknowledge serious inefficiencies in how the world's finite supply of fossil fuel is currently being used – such as a huge and growing global commercial transport sector that moves industrial food and non-food products over long distances across the globe. Second, they ignore the fact that industrial agriculture and industrial livestock production are major emitters of key greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, and methane).

Further reading:

S. Kay (2012), Positive Investment Alternatives to Large-Scale Land Acquisitions or Leases http://www.tni.org/paper/positive-land-investment-alternatives

The fourth myth is that property rights are the best solution to greater land tenure security, which has sustained the argument that land deals could be beneficial as long as they are based on secure property rights. This makes a simple assumption: people are dispossessed because they do not have formal property rights over their land; and so, the policy response should be to provide land tenure security to these people. Yet here too a critical historical perspective on land issues and land policy frameworks is needed. In the land policy literature 'security' means providing, promoting and/or protecting the property rights of the exclusive owners and/or users of land; it usually means individual and private rights; the commodification of land, and transforming it into something marketable.

Titles are the chief expression of this so-called security. These interpretations reinforce the conservative view of land as a 'thing' with only economic use-value, which undermines many other values associated with land for communities worldwide.

But an even deeper problem with the notion of 'security' is that it can mean anything – whether legitimate or not, whether truly pro-poor or not. Land tenure security can mean the property security of big landlords living in the capital city and relying on tenants or farm workers to make the land productive. It can also mean security of the banks that are selling capital for profit, and need collateral in case of payment default. In the current context of global land grabbing, 'security' more often than not refers to the security of transnational capital invested in land.

How does land grabbing take place?

Land grabbing today is marked by variation across different agro-ecological contexts and property rights regimes. It is affecting contexts as diverse as peri-urban corridors, highly productive floodplains, forested uplands, and remote rural outposts. It is unfolding in diverse land rights regimes, including private, public, and community land, and regardless of whether existing rights and arrangements are recognised by state law or not. And actual reallocation processes are taking place under diverse political-legal conditions, with some illegal and others 'perfectly legal'. Some of the most prominent cases involve physical harassment, intimidation and violence; but others do not. Finally, it is worth noting that a good deal of these recent land investments have remained dormant, and thus are more related to land value speculation than to productive ventures.[8]

Legal land grabs?

Acquisitions where formal state laws are skirted are clearly 'grabs'. But then what about cases where the deals don't break formal rules and laws? This is the case in many African countries, where, as independent scholar Liz Alden Wily points out, "the current land rush amply demonstrates the use of perfectly legal means of dispossession or reallocation of lands involving significant loss of access for rural poor and not a little physical displacement in practice."[9] 'Perfectly legal' land grabs are apparent elsewhere too. In Cambodia, for example, Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) are the legal mechanism for reallocating already occupied and cultivated land in areas classified as 'state private land', as happened when the Phnom Penh Sugar Company, owned by a powerful businessman-politician, was awarded a 99-year government lease on 9,052 hectares in 2006.

What is the history of land grabbing?

Land grabbing is not new, tracing back through centuries of human history in the North, South, East and West and encompassing many episodes and innumerable examples, including pre-colonial land seizures associated with territorial wars, European enclosures in the North, and dispossession of native peoples in North America and Australasia. "In many regions of the global South, land was first grabbed by pre-colonial rulers in chronic territorial wars with each other, then by colonial governments and increasingly by foreign or domestic corporations".[10] But tracing the history of land grabbing reveals much more than just the fact that land grabbing is not new.

Past land grabbing has mattered for the political processes and precedents that were established and which are still shaping how and where land grabbing is happening today. It is in the very long history of land grabbing that one can find, according to Liz Alden Wily, the establishment of "the legal manipulations which continue to make [land] rushes possible".[11] Many of the same core ideas that are justifying and facilitating land grabbing today were established in past episodes of land grabbing. For instance, to name just a few, ideas such as: (i) the efficiency of seizing land and securing it as exclusive 'property' through legal means (ii) the utility of justifying which lands 'can' be grabbed using the discursive device of 'vacant' or 'empty' land and (iii) the value of establishing an overriding legitimacy in taking over someone's land for reasons of 'public purpose' or 'public interest'.

Meanwhile, a more recent past not of land grabbing, but of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), privatisation of public services (including family farming support-services), investment de-regulation and trade liberalisation, is what underpins and has helped to make possible the cycle of land grabbing we see today.

What is new about the current wave of land grabbing?

There is general consensus that a number of factors distinguish the most recent wave of land grabbing from the past. First, the trend is unfolding at a relatively fast pace, set by changing dynamics in the global food regime, in energy security responses to 'peak oil', in environmental protection in the context of climate change, and in the international flow of finance capital searching for safe investments after the collapse of housing markets in the North.

Special Land Grabbing Zones

The experience of Dawei Special Economic Zone in Burma

A collaboration between Thai and Myanmar governments and Italian-Thai investors has led to a massive land grab in Tanintharyi Division, which borders Mon State to the North, and Thailand to the East. Tens of thousands of people are at risk of being displaced for the Dawei Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which, with a total estimated investment of over USD $50 billion, hopes to be Southeast Asia's largest industrial complex, complete with a deep seaport, industrial estate (including a large petrochemical industrial complex), and a road/pipeline/rail link that will extend 350 kilometers to Bangkok. The land grab that has resulted does not just encompass the land directly associated with the SEZ project (according to official figures 32,274 people in at least nineteen villages will ultimately be displaced); but also a wave of additional land grabbing that has resulted from the speculation and large-scale financial investment in the region. This has caused a surge of land grabbing by local and foreign elites and a speculative spike in land prices that is squeezing out (primarily) Dawei and Karen farmers and rural dwellers.

Source: E. Loewen (2012), Land Grabbing in Dawei: An (Inter)National Human Rights Concern, TNI Agrarian Justice Programme and Paungku. http://www.tni.org/report/land-grabbing-dawei

Second, the trend is towards large-scale acquisitions of land. These include 30,000 hectares acquired in Nigeria by US company Dominion Farms in 2011 for rice; 60,000 hectares acquired in Cambodia by local businessman-politician Ly Yong Phat in 2006 for sugar cane; and 1 million hectares acquired in Argentina by the Italian company Benetton in 2002 for wool, cereals and wood.

Third, the trend is also towards long-term leases, purchase or other economic arrangements (e.g., contract growing and supermarket contracts, for example). The basic land transactions typically range from 30 to 50 or even 99 years at a time, often with the option to renew too.

Fourth, the trend has become global in scope, reaching farther inside and outside the global South than initially reported. While Africa is certainly a hotspot, research shows it happening virtually everywhere: throughout South and Central America, throughout South and Southeast Asia, and in many parts of the global North, particularly the former Soviet Eurasia.

This combination of factors led civil society groups and transnational networks to alert the world to the global land grab underway and its considerable negative impacts on communities and fragile ecosystems.[12] When protests erupted in Madagascar against the government for agreeing behind closed doors to lease 3.2. million hectares of land to Daewoo Logistics for 99 years, the concerns reached media attention and land grabbing was suddenly on the television screens.

On what scale is land grabbing taking place?

Large-scale land deals have risen 20 million hectares between 2005 and 2009 according to the International Food Policy Research Institute/ IFPRI (2009); 45 million hectares since 2007-2008 according to the World Bank (2010); and 227 million hectares since 2000 according to Oxfam (2011).

Ultimately though it is virtually impossible to know how much land grabbing is taking place. One problem is that many land deals are simply not reported; they take place in secret and are not covered by the media. But even if each and every land deal was reported, it would still be impossible to pin down the numbers for a variety of reasons. *First,* the projects involved in reported large-scale land acquisitions can be at widely different stages of planning and operationalisation – some just initial, others more advanced. *Second*, the financing behind the projects is fluid and can change abruptly, as happened in the Procana sugarcane plantation project in Mozambique, for which 30,000 hectares was reallocated in 2007. Yet the project was abruptly ended in 2009 after some key investors backed out, but not before thousands of villagers were expelled and nearly a thousand hectares had been cleared and planted to sugar cane. Two years on, though, it seems the project is now back on track (in theory at least) with a new set of investors, this time from South Africa.[13] *Third*, there is the problem of unreliable and corrupt recording of measurable data about land and land use, a problem which goes back further than the current wave of land grabbing and has to do with both technical and political factors. In the end, measuring land grabbing is like trying to pin a wave to the sand.

How is land grabbing tied to water grabbing?

The current dynamics of global capital around energy, food and environmental questions have coalesced to bring water into sharper focus as a commercial asset too.[14] Water is a critical factor in land grabbing, shaping which lands are attractive and which are not. But water is extremely time and space specific. It can be very scarce on a seasonal basis, even if abundant during other parts of the year. Local water management arrangements are often the result of complex, socially constructed agreements amongst diverse users that are well attuned to dynamic ecological and hydrological conditions. Land converted to the production of water intensive food, feed and fuel crop monocultures requires secure and stable supply of large volumes of water over time, usually through large-scale irrigation. The diversion, depletion and pollution of local water sources that often follows can thus undermine pre-existing arrangements and form a direct threat to a wide range of local livelihoods.

Land grabbing and water grabbing are deeply intertwined. Investors in large scale agricultural projects are unlikely to grab the land needed for planting crops, without also ensuring that the large volume of water that will be needed to guarantee high yields is stable and secure. Some research has shown how this water factor is often part of the land lease or purchase contracts between the investors and governments.[15]

Further reading:

S. Kay and J. Franco (2012), The Global Water Grab: A Primer http://www.tni.org/primer/global-water-grab-primer?context=69566

L.Mehta, GJ Veldwisch and J. Franco (2012), Introduction to the Special Issue: Water Grabbing? Focus on the (re) appropriation of finite water resources. In *Water Alternatives* 5(2) http://www.water-alternatives.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=213&Itemid=1

Water grabbing also appears in cases where water is the main target of the grab – as in hydropower development, or in relation to mining enterprises. Infamous examples – Narmada Dam in India, Belo Horizonte Dam in Brazil, and the Mekong River dams (the latter also raising controversy over transboundary water issues) have typically involved the massive expulsion of people and flooding of farm and grazing land, fields and forests. Similarly, the case of mining as an instance of water grabbing, due to the pollution of streams and rivers with mine tailings, also illustrates how mining affects the local political economy and can even destroy it altogether (see the case of the Marcopper mining disaster on the island of Marinduque in the Philippines, for example).[16]

What is 'Green Grabbing'?

Guardian journalist, John Vidal perhaps first coined the term 'Green grabbing', which has been described as 'the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends', such as conservation enclosures and carbon sequestration and trading programmes, for instance.[17] It includes schemes which give you a certificate of 'protected savannah' for a donation to an environmental charity or programmes that promise to 'offset' your climate emissions, through planting biochar feedstock plantations on "under-used marginal" lands in Africa, for example. This idea that you need to 'sell nature to save it' has gained added momentum since the UN Rio+20 conference, when the United Nations Environmental Programme promoted pricing mechanisms of natural assets as part of its vision for a Green Economy. The commodification of nature, and its appropriation by a wide group of players, for a range of uses – current future and speculative – in the name of "sustainability", "conservation" or "green" values is accelerating'.

The experience of the UN's Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) proto-type projects, that are predicated on the idea of offsetting emissions in the industrialised North by protecting forests in the South has raised concerns due to its social and environmental impacts. Academic *and* activist research has revealed how many actual carbon sequestration and trading projects can become 'footholds' for various forms of dispossession to take place. Expulsion from the land is just one trajectory. Others include curtailing of access rights to forest or water resources, or shifting of smallholder labour from subsistence and cash crop production to carbon sequestration, resulting in the loss of important short-term benefits of land use.

Further reading:

Green grabbing, the social costs of putting a price on nature, Interview with Melissa Leach http://www.tni.org/interview/green-grabbing

Green grabbing: a new appropriation of nature, Volume 39, Issue No. 2 special issue, Journal of Peasant Studies (eds. James Fairhead, Melissa Leach and Ian Scoones) http://www.tni.org/article/green-grabbing-new-appropriation-nature

No REDD: a reader http://noredd.makenoise.org/no-redd-a-reader.html

What impacts does land grabbing have?

Many proponents of large-scale land acquisitions insist that they can benefit local people, mainly through employment in the new economic arrangements and through new social and economic infrastructure. However, it is important to point out that so far there is precious little concrete evidence to back up such claims of benefits, and instead history is littered with bad examples. So the burden of proof still lies heavily on those who claim much good can come from land grabbing.

There is growing evidence from academic and activist research so far that suggests that the impacts of land grabbing on rural poor communities and ecosystems have been largely negative so far. Local people are being expelled when their land is needed, but their labour is not, and what often follows if promises have been made, is a trail of broken agreements around such issues as payment for damages, resettlement in improved conditions, and compensation. In cases of expulsion, the loss of land which at least provided a minimum subsistence is one of the biggest losses possible for people living at the margins.

When peoples' land and labour are needed, they are being incorporated into the emerging new enterprises. Not all instances of incorporation – through wage labour or growers contracts, for example – turns out negatively. But more frequently it does turn

out badly, precisely because the critical conditions that could potentially enable local people to achieve a truly powerful presence at the negotiating table tend not to be present in the areas targeted by investors. As a result, those who have been incorporated are generally left to struggle, often alone and in isolation and against many odds, to achieve even the minimum threshold of decency in wages and working conditions or to improve the terms of their lease and labour contracts.

Who or what are the main drivers of the recent wave of land grabbing?

The initially flagged culprits for land grabbing were food importing countries such as the Gulf States and South Korea. It is certainly true that they did fuel a renewed push to land grabbing, driven by their perception that they could no longer rely, as they had in the past, on market-sourcing of food, and thus looked for avenues of more direct control of food supply, resulting in their efforts to gain direct control of off-shore land and food production. This dynamic describes the case of Libya in Mali; of South Korea in Madagascar; and of Saudi Arabia in Sudan.[18]

Tree plantations and insecure labour in Mozambique

In the Niassa province of Mozambique, Chikweti Forests, a subsidiary of Swedish investment fund, acquired a lease of 140,000 hectares, in part with the promise that it would provide 3000 jobs. By 2012, however, only 900 people were being employed. Of those who had jobs, many of the contracts turned out to be short-term, seasonal work coinciding with the agricultural season which meant that workers neglected their fields during this important time of the year. The work in the plantations is highly intense, with long working hours and limited to the minimum wage for the agricultural sector, which is currently 2,300 Meticais, i.e. about 66 Euro per month. Workers do not receive any benefits other than their salary and there have been repeated conflicts about non-payment of workers in case of absence due to health reasons and of delayed payments. The World Bank's report on Land Grabbing states that Mozambican minimum wage is "insufficient to compensate for lost livelihoods."

Source: P. Seufert, eds. (2012), Human rights implications of tree plantations in Niassa province, Mozambique http://www.tni.org/report/human-rights-niassa-province

Bittersweet: Sugar plantations, land seizures and human rights in Cambodia

In August 2006, two adjoining economic land concessions were granted of approximately 20,000 hectares in Botumsakor and Sre Ambel districts of Koh Kong. The concessions were granted to two companies – Koh Kong Plantation Co. Ltd. and Koh Kong Sugar Industry Co. Ltd – in an apparent attempt to circumvent restrictions on the size of economic land concessions stipulated by the Cambodian Land Law. Since then there have been reports of serious human rights violations connected to this concession. According to a Cambodian legal aid organisation and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as of 2007, thousands of villagers have reported complaints about the companies' encroachment on their land. Villagers have lost both residential land and farmland that they legally possess and depend upon to sustain their families. Villagers are now reported to be facing difficulties in repaying loans taken out under micro-credit schemes, due to the loss of sources of income. During one forced eviction, two villagers received non-fatal gunshot wounds, while other community members were beaten with rifle butts as they tried to protect their homes from demolition. There are also documented instances of company staff confiscating villagers' livestock and demanding payment for their return. Community members also report intimidation by company staff and security forces.

Source: "Bittersweet: A Briefing Paper on Industrial sugar Production, Trade and Human Rights in Cambodia", Bridges Across Borders, September 2010. http://babcambodia.org/developmentwatch/cleansugarcampaign/bittersweet.pdf

North Atlantic states also fuelled foreign government-driven land control grabs through the enforcement of rules allowing for a greater financialisation of capital that increased speculation in food markets, and through key policies, such as those related to mandatory agrofuel blending in petrol and diesel fuels, such as US's American Clean Energy and Security Act and the European Union's Renewable Energy Directive. Agrofuels were justified on environmental terms, as 'carbon-neutral' fuels. However the claims that agrofuels are carbon neutral and renewable has been increasingly questioned as it ignores the emissions that result from collecting, transporting, processing and burning the biomass as fuel as well as the impacts of removing plants, trees and related biomass that would otherwise have continued to absorb carbon.[19]

Yet even as the touted environmental benefits failed to live up to scrutiny, the biofuel mania had by then infected governments and businesses in the South who joined in the land rush in anticipation of increased demand for agrofuel feedstocks.

Beyond the specific driver of agrofuels in fuelling land grabbing lies the emergence of a powerful agro-industrial complex which combines corporate food, animal feedstock, agrofuels, timber, minerals, oil and general biomass complexes. The expanding volume and changing diet and consumption patterns of fast-growing, large economies -- such as China and India -- have further strengthened this complex and led to major shifts in how much and what kind of food crops are produced, and how. The 'meatification' of diets,[20] for example has had a profound impact on the industrial feed complex (soya, corn, and so on) with direct consequences for land use.

The emergence of 'flex crops' has also had a major impact. Flex crops are crops that have multiple uses (food, feed, fuel, industrial material) that can be easily and flexibly inter-changed: soya (feed, food, biodiesel), sugarcane (food, ethanol), oil palm (food, biodiesel, commercial/industrial uses), corn (food, feed, ethanol). Hence, in a single crop sector we find multiple contexts of land grabs: food, feed, energy/fuel and climate change mitigation strategies.[21] These are articulated through increasingly entangled global commodity value chains, making it impossible to reduce all these heterogeneous dynamics to a single driver of land grabbing.

Today most of these deals are being driven by foreign and/or domestic private ventures linked to any (or various) of the aforementioned global hubs of capital accumulation. They are usually in close partnership (or collusion) with national governments and/or local elites and serve the needs of a minority global class of consumers distributed across an increasingly multi-centric global food and agro-commodity system (as the G-20 displaces the G-7).[22]

Contemporary land grabbing dynamics are thus multi-centric, since the grabbers are coming from all hemispheres and continents.

Further reading:

J. Franco, D. Fig, L. Mendonca et al (2010), Agrofuel crops. http://www.tni.org/report/agrofuel-crops

What is the role of the EU in land grabbing?

The European Union is heavily implicated in land grabbing, both directly through the involvement of EU capital and corporations in the takeover of land, and indirectly through the suite of EU policies which are transforming land into a global commodity.

A remarkable feature has been the involvement of new financial actors and institutional investors – such as European pension funds – in the acquisition of farmland, including the Swedish AP2, the Dutch APG and PGGM, and the Danish PKA.

Amongst the EU policies driving land grabbing, the Renewable Energy Directive (RED) has played a prominent role. The prospect of a long-term, lucrative European market for agrofuels has been an important trigger in the oil palm boom in Southeast Asia for example. Trade policies and free trade agreements can also generate strong incentives for land grabbing. In 2001 the EU adopted the Everything But Arms (EBA) agreement in which imports into the EU from the world's least developed countries would be free from any duties or restrictions - except for arms and ammunitions. While such an agreement may sound benign it has helped to fuel global land grabbing in Cambodia and elsewhere.

Europe itself is also a target of land grabbing. In the past few years, Western European companies from Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Switzerland and France have been accumulating land in Eastern Europe, concentrating in particular on the 'Black Earth' area of Russia and the Ukraine.

Further reading:

Hands off the Land (2012), The European Union and the Global Land Grab http://www.tni.org/briefing/european-union-and-global-land-grab

Bridges Across Border (2010).

"Bittersweet: A Briefing Paper on Industrial Sugar Production, Trade and Human Rights in Cambodia" from http://babcambodia.org/developmentwatch/cleansugarcampaign/bittersweet.pdf)

http://www.boycottbloodsugar.net/

What solutions have been proposed to address land grabbing?

Everyone who acknowledges the existence of land grabbing wants to manage, or govern, it in one way or another. Governance has become the key word; accountability and transparency tools have become important items in the policy agenda. It is worth noting that the *idea* of having UN-sanctioned voluntary guidelines on land tenure predates the 2007-2008 food (price) crisis, and the formal processes of planning and consultations were already underway when the current cycle of land grabbing began making international headlines. As a result, the official negotiations in mid 2011 ended up taking place in this new context – a twist of fate which made (or re-made) them into an especially charged site of debate and struggle.

In the meantime, the dominant activist storyline of 'land grabbing' had seen since 2009 increasing challenges from more mainstream currents in calls for a 'code of conduct' for 'large-scale land acquisitions.' By 2010, the World Bank and others were actively promoting a new storyline – that of the new land deals as a potential opportunity for rural development under certain conditions that minimised or avoided possible negative social and environmental effects. This new storyline – captured in the phrase 'making a virtue out of necessity' -- eventually crystallised in the World Bank-led advocacy for "Principles for Responsible Investment of Agriculture" (or PRAI), a set of seven principles, which if adhered to by multiple 'stakeholders' including companies and governments, would promote 'win-win' outcomes for all.

It is in this context that the final negotiations over the FAO guidelines became a central arena of interaction between different state and non-state actors to try to influence the way land grabs are to be governed. The result was that the negotiations slowed considerably amidst heated debates; and the eventual document of more than 50 pages contained a contradictory mix of philosophical and political positions. These range from a conservative 'market-based mechanisms' perspective to a radical human rights and social justice perspective. Consequently, whether and to what extent the Guidelines can be used to stop land grabbing will depend on how they get interpreted by competing forces embedded in actually existing power structures and concrete situations.

In this context, three tendencies have emerged in the global land grab debate. The first argues for regulation essentially to facilitate land investment. It is premised on the belief that interest in large-scale land deals is a desirable phenomenon where states and the corporate sector have become interested in land (again). It says good governance is guaranteed through strengthened property rights, environmental and labour standards, greater community consultation, and the use of some international governance instruments such as transparency mechanisms in land deals in order to facilitate capital accumulation within an efficient institutional context. This position is probably closest to that of the World Bank.

The second tendency proposes regulation to mitigate negative impacts and maximize opportunities. It is premised on the twin assumption of 'inevitability' of large-scale land deals and the 'impossibility' of redistributive land and rural development policies to promote small scale farming-based development. It also proposes a number of international governance instruments to support its position: strengthened property rights to protect the land rights of people, environmental and labour standards, greater community consultation, and particularly the use of transparency instruments such as free, prior, informed consent (FPIC). It usually asks the basic question: given that they are happening how can large-scale land deals be made more accountable and transparent in order to benefit poor people? This position is supported by some in FAO, some governments and some parts of civil society.

The third tendency calls for regulation to stop and rollback land grabbing. It is premised on the belief that the contemporary expansion of production for food, biofuels, feed and others are not really meant to solve world's hunger, poverty and environmental degradation, but to further capital accumulation for the insatiable corporate hunger for profits. This process of capital accumulation advances a development model based on large-scale, industrial, monocrop plantations that expel people from their land and degrade the environment. This third current proposes similar international governance instruments: property rights for the people (although not limited to western private property ideas, to include communal and community property regimes), environmental standards, community consultations, and transparency instruments but with the view to use these to stop and roll-back land grabbing. This position is maintained by various social movements and peasant groups, notably the peasant farmer association, La Via Campesina.

The three tendencies are more or less stable, but key state and non-state actors and their political stands are dynamic and constantly changing, often straddling two or three tendencies depending on the particular configuration of issues and alliances and context.

Further reading:

C. Guffens and F. Kroff (2012), Guidelines to secure peoples access to land: Overview of new 'Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security' – The potentials and challenges of implementation. http://www.tni.org/report/secure-peoples-access-land

Land grabbing is a global phenomenon initiated by local and transnational elites, governments and multinational companies in order to control the most previous resources in the world… [It] exceeds the traditional North-South split that characterizes imperialist structures.

Land grabbing displaces and dislocates communities, destroys local economies, cultures and the social fabric. It endangers the identity of communities be they peasants, small-scale farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, workers, indigenous peoples…

Our land and identifies are not for sale…

There is no way to attenuate the impact of this economic model and of the power structures that defend it.

Those who dare stand up to defend their legitimate rights and survival of their families and communities are beaten, imprisoned and killed…

The struggle against land grabbing is a struggle against capitalism…

Via Campesina 2012: 21-22.

Why are guidelines and transparency not sufficient to tackle land grabbing?

While laws and policies can be passed to respond to land grabbing, they do not self-interpret nor self-implement. It is the political interaction of various state and non-state actors that will shape how voluntary guidelines will eventually be interpreted and implemented, from one setting to another.

Most advocates of 'responsible' land investment fail to critically analyse the the nature of local power relations and the extremely long and difficult challenge of rural democratisation in particular.[23] Rural democratisation has long been a challenge, and is the long and difficult struggle to build and maintain autonomous social organisations capable of democratically representing the interests of rural working poor classes, and of demanding state accountability. These conditions and processes cannot be simply manufactured suddenly, once a large-scale land grab hits the ground. They are struggled for and built over time by real people embedded in complex power structures, and in relation to many issues, including land issues.

In the absence or weakness of such organisations and demands for accountability, the focus on making land grabs more transparent is unlikely to produce anything more than just more transparent land grabs. Real state accountability should begin at a radically different starting point, long before land grabs ever come onto the scene – that is, the starting point should be the rural working poor classes and what are their needs and aspirations, and how can their already existing, meaningful investments in the land be augmented and sustained in order to ensure truly pro-poor outcomes.

What systemic changes are needed to end land grabbing?

In the current global debate over land grabbing, investment tends to be equated with corporate investment that is skewed towards large scale, petrol-based and capital intensive/labor expelling ventures. A fundamental starting point when talking about systemic change to end land grabbing is to bring in two other types of investment, namely public investment and investments by small-scale farmers.

Under neoliberalism, state-driven investments in agriculture dried up, while investments by small-scale farmers were made invisible. The urgent task is to revive state investment while making investments by small-scale farmers visible. It is the combination of state and small farmers' investments that make any systemic change to end land grabbing possible.

And it is important that the philosophy and practice of agro-ecology be taken seriously in this joint investment framework. Agroecology captures the need for social equity and ecological sustainability. As the High Level Panel of Experts from the FAO-based World Committee on Food Security recommends "governments should prioritize investment in the small farm sector and in alternative food systems that are socially inclusive and just as well as environmentally sustainable, using agro-ecological principles".[24]

What is agro-ecology?

"The core principles of agro-ecology include recycling nutrients and energy on the farm, rather than introducing external inputs; enhancing soil organic matter and soil biological activity; diversifying plant species and genetic resources in agro-ecosystems over time and space; integrating crops and livestock and optimizing interactions and productivity of the total farming system, rather than the yields of individual species"....
"Agro-ecology is highly knowledge-intensive, and is based on techniques that are not delivered top-down but developed on the basis of farmers' knowledge and experimentation. For this reason agro-ecology emphasizes the capability of local communities to experiment, evaluate, and scale-up innovations through farmer-to-farmer research and grassroots extension approaches."

Source: Miguel A. Altieri and Victor Manuel Toledo (2011), 'The agroecological revolution in Latin America: rescuing nature, ensuring food sovereignty and empowering peasants', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.38, No.3

Further viewing:

Miguel Altieri: On Agroecology, and why it is the solution to hunger and food security
http://www.tni.org/multimedia/miguel-altieri-agroecology-and-why-it-solution-hunger-and-food-security?context=69566

What does the concept of food sovereignty have to offer?

Land sovereignty is the right of working peoples to have effective access to, use of, and control over land and the benefits of its use and occupation, where land is understood as resource, territory, and landscape. Simply put, land sovereignty is the realisation of the working peoples' human right to land. It looks to build on the strengths – yet also address the weaknesses in the current context - of traditional calls for 'land security' and 'land reform', allying itself and intrinsically linked with the growing global movement for 'food sovereignty.'

The demand for land sovereignty is, first of all, a call to action to bring the state back in and hold it accountable to citizens amidst a renewed corporate and transnational global assault on the agrarian front in the form of transnational enclosures. And second it is an affirmation for working peoples and their human right to control over land as resources, territory and landscapes. It has the potential to unite very diverse sectors: peasants from Mali, forest dwellers from Indonesia, peasants from Guatemala, a part-time small family farm in France, and an urban gardener in Detroit.

Further reading:

S. Borras and J. Franco: A land sovereignty alternative? Towards a people's counter-enclosure campaign http://www.tni.org/paper/land-sovereignty-alternative

The term 'land sovereignty' reminds us that individual and collective plots of land are part of larger socially constructed landscapes and waterscapes, which in turn reflect the kind of relationship between human societies and the environment that has emerged over time in a given place, whether balanced or not, and should push us to always strive for an ecologically healthy relationship with our environment.

What resistance is being undertaken against land grabbing?

There are two broad types of resistance linked to current land grabbing today. The first type is a defensive struggle to resist expulsion of people from the land, or resistance against the appropriation of their water resources or community forest. The second type is a pro-active struggle where local communities occupy and enclose their land, water or forest and develop alternative livelihoods and production systems such as agro-ecology that challenge the dominant model of industrial development. Both types are life-and-death struggles.

The most successful struggles often use a multiple range of tactics including direct action, mass mobilisation and legal strategies and work hard at linking with other sectors and putting pressure at all the key points in the "chain" of dispossession/adverse incorporation.

Building networks against paramilitaries and banana businessmen

The case study of Banacol and the Lower Atrato region of Chocó, Colombia

Afro-Colombian and Mestizo communities in Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó, in the Lower Atrato region of Choco, have resisted invasion and land grabbing for generations. The communities, dependent for their livelihoods on shifting food production and livestock grazing, as well as for hunting and fishing, have suffered from counter-insurgency, paramilitary violence, and encroachment on their territories by banana and oil palm agribusinesses, logging and mining companies, cattle ranchers, and drug-traffickers. Some of the groups are linked to the banana transnational Banacol, which markets its products in Europe through different firms. To counter this complex nexus of domestic and international capital, paramilitary and state violence the Afro-Colombian and Mestizo populations organised themselves into '*redes*' (assemblages, more than networks) linking diverse entities such as social movement organisations, local radio networks, women's associations, links with international solidarity movements. They did this not only to defend their land but also to foster the construction of 'new existential territories'. They also declared their communities 'Humanitarian Zones' and parts of their territory as 'Biodiversity Zones', with the aim of defending themselves and more pro-actively developing alternative land use plans, low external input agriculture and culturally appropriate educational systems. The *redes* had some success, with legal victories supporting their claims to land in the Constitutional Court and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights; and the State Council order in 2010 to evict some of the bad-faith invaders. Even so, the material land restitution has not been yet been fully achieved. Afro-Colombian and Mestizo peoples keep on struggling in *redes* for dignity and life to blossom again in their territories.

Source: Interchurch Justice and Peace Commission (August 2012), Colombia: Banacol – A company implicated in paramilitarism, and land grabbing in Curvarado and Jiguamiando http://www.tni.org/report/colombia-banacol?context=69566.

Further reading:

Alonso-Fradejas, A. (2012) 'Land control-grabbing in Guatemala: the political economy of contemporary agrarian change'. Canadian Journal of Development Studies (forthcoming).

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Endnotes

1 Food-importing countries with land and water constraints but rich in capital, such as the Gulf States, are at the forefront of new investments in farmland abroad. In addition, countries with large populations and food security concerns such as China, South Korea, and India are seeking opportunities to produce food overseas. These investments are targeted toward developing countries where production costs are much lower and where land and water are more abundant" (IFPRI Policy Brief 13, April 2009).

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19 Haberl, H., et al., Correcting a fundamental error in greenhouse gas accounting related to bioenergy. Energy Policy (2012), doi:10.1016/j.enpol.2012.02.051

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AGRARIAN JUSTICE PROGRAMME

In recent years, various actors, from big foreign and domestic corporate business and finance to governments, have initiated a large-scale worldwide enclosure of agricultural lands, mostly in the Global South but also elsewhere. This is done for large-scale industrial and industrial agriculture ventures and often packaged as large-scale investment for rural development. But rather than being investment that is going to benefit the majority of rural people, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, this process constitutes a new wave of land and water 'grabbing'. It is a global phenomenon whereby the access, use and right to land and other closely associated natural resources is being taken over - on a large-scale and/or by large-scale capital – resulting in a cascade of negative impacts on rural livelihoods and ecologies, human rights, and local food security.

In this context TNI aims to contribute to strengthening the campaigns by agrarian social movements in order to make them more effective in resisting land and water grabbing; and in developing and advancing alternatives such as land/food/water sovereignty and agro-ecological farming systems.

http://www.tni.org/work-area/agrarian-justice

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