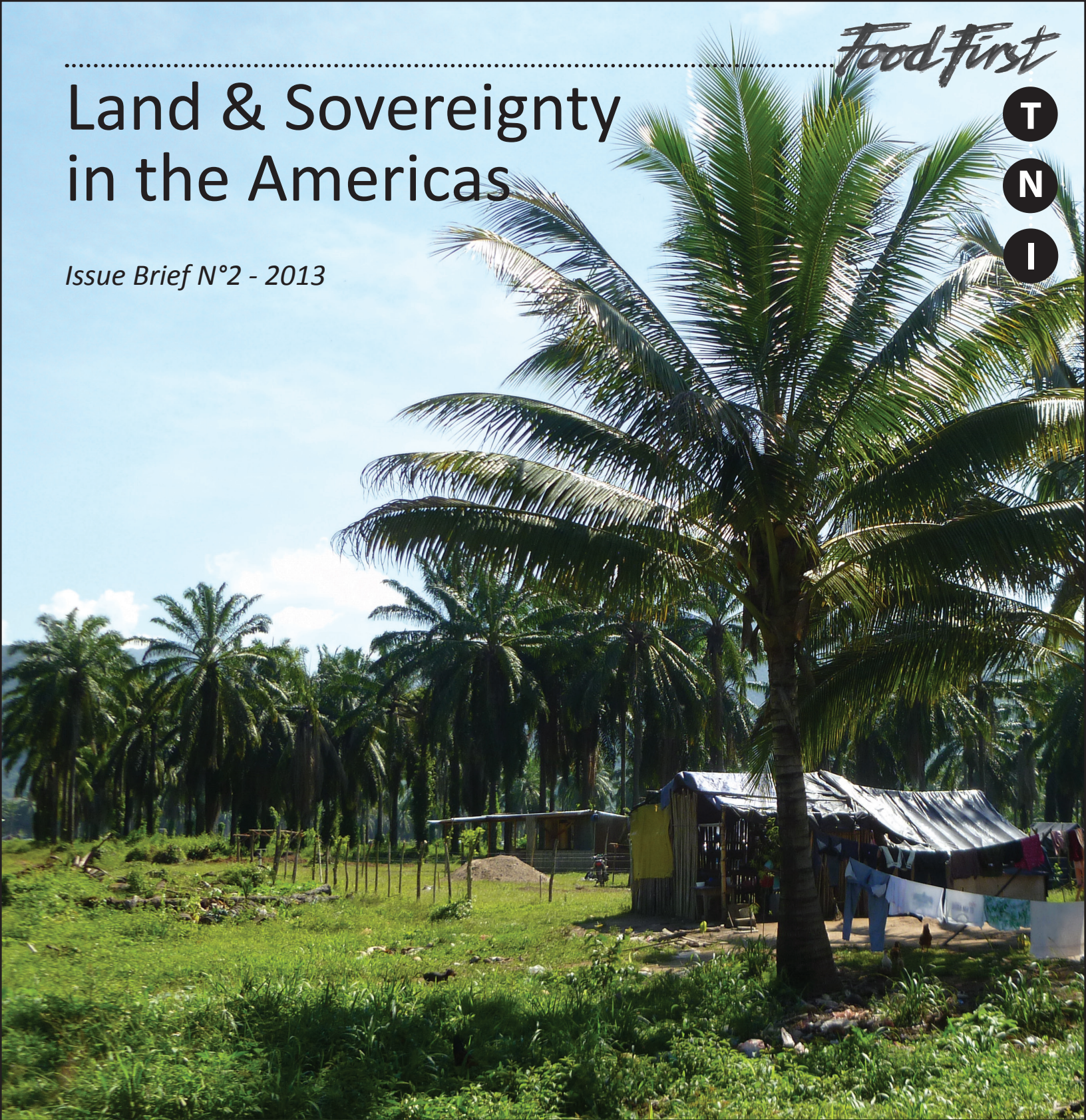


Land & Sovereignty in the Americas

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Governing the Global Land Grab: Competing political tendencies

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About the series:

The *Land & Sovereignty in the Americas* series pulls together research and analysis from activists and scholars working to understand and halt the alarming trend in "land grabbing"—from rural Brazil and Central America to US cities like Oakland and Detroit— and to support rural and urban communities in their efforts to protect their lands as the basis for self-determination, food justice and food sovereignty. The series is a project of the Land & Sovereignty in the Americas (LSA) activist-researcher collective, coordinated by Food First. For media inquiries about this series, or to arrange an interview with an author, please contact land@foodfirst.org or call (510) 654-4400, ext. 235.

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Introduction

Reports of land grabbing from various parts of the world continue to come in: land grabbing for agriculture to produce food, feed, biofuels and other industrial products; “green grabbing” or land grabbing for environmental ends; and water grabbing for the irrigation of large-scale monocultures, hydroelectricity and other corporate uses. Understanding contemporary land grabs requires grasping the changing context in which they occur: the emergence of “flex crops”, the rise of BRICS and middle-income countries, and the re-valued role of nation-states. This brief provides crucial context for understanding land grabbing and discusses three political tendencies in global land governance. In order for transnational movements to carry out more effective advocacy campaigns against land grabbing and influence global governance, they should understand these competing tendencies, and reassess and adjust their political framework.

The rise of flex crops—crops with multiple uses across food, feed, fuel and industrial complexes—has far-reaching implications for global land governance.

complexes. Think of corn, for example, which is eaten fresh, frozen or canned; used to produce industrial sweeteners; processed into animal feed; and milled to produce ethanol for blending with gasoline. These crops are produced in both tropical and temperate countries, resulting in rising interest in land in both the Global South *and* the Global North. Currently, maize, oil palm, soybean and sugarcane are the four most popular flex crops. Tree plantations are another sector where global land grabbing is occurring. “Flex trees” or “flex forests” can be used for various purposes including timber and wood chip-based biofuel, while at the same time being used to speculate on carbon offset schemes like REDD+.¹

Global Transformations

The Rise of Flex Crops

Many large-scale land investments target “flex crops” (also referred to as “high value crops”)—crops with multiple uses across food, feed, fuel and industrial

The rise of flex crops has far-reaching implications for global land governance. Transnational governance mechanisms are generally structured by sector or theme: food, feed, energy/fuel, forestry, climate change mitigation, etc. How then can one categorize soy or oil palm, which may fall within several of these categories? Which sectoral rules apply? This

QUICK FACTS: Land Grabbing - Three Political Tendencies

1) Regulate to Facilitate Land Deals

Proponents of this tendency favor large-scale land deals as essentially a desirable phenomenon.

2) Regulate to Mitigate Negative Impacts

Many groups in this camp assume that land deals are “inevitable” and thus seek to mitigate their negative impacts and maximize their opportunities.

3) Regulate to STOP and Roll Back Land Grabbing

This camp deploys international governance instruments in order to “expose and oppose,” stop and rollback land grabbing.

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fragmented political space makes framing a particular issue or organizing advocacy campaigns focused on single issues increasingly difficult and complex.

The Emergence of New Actors

New international actors like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), some powerful MICs (middle income countries), OECD countries (e.g. South Korea) and the Gulf States are beginning to reshape the international rules that govern the production, distribution and consumption of food and other commodities. This does not mean the conventional powerholders are marginalized—Europe and the US remain key players in the global food system, and North Atlantic-based finance capital has been increasingly involved in land deals. It does, however, pose challenges for civil society organizations that are used to interacting with OECD countries. How are they going to interact with new players like China, India, Gulf States, Vietnam and others with which there are no prior channels and patterns of interaction in the transnational domain?

The Role of Nation-States

Various state and social actors view land grabbing differently—either as an opportunity or as a threat. Some states, notably in South America, have introduced moratoriums on foreign land purchases. Others act to facilitate large-scale land investments and are engaged in systematic policy initiatives aimed at capturing so-called marginal lands. The role of the state in facilitating land investments includes justification, identification, reclassification, appropriation and re-allocation of these lands to investors—often at the expense of local land users. States facilitate land grabs in three distinct but related ways: simplification, assertion of state sovereignty and authority, and coercion through state security forces.

First, states engage in a process of simplification in which cadastres, land records and titles are created to simplify land-based social relations and re-classify lands as available. The trend seems to be: if the land is not formally privatized, then it is “state-owned”; if an official census did not show significant formal



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settlements, then these are “empty” lands; and if the same official census did not show significant production activities, then these are “unused” lands. Second, beyond the economic benefits of land investment, land deals are also viewed as a component of state-building processes wherein sovereignty and authority are extended to previously “non-state spaces.” And third, in many parts of the world, states have employed coercion and violence, usually with the use of police and (para)military, to enforce compliance with the state simplification project and the broader state-building process. The crucial role of national states has made international governance more complex, and it will be a challenge for intergovernmental institutions to make national governments responsive to international rules.

Three Competing Tendencies

Because of the international dimension of land grabbing, civil society organizations have placed pressure on global governance instruments (e.g. World Bank, FAO) to tackle the issue of land grabbing. The resulting approaches include the International Food Policy Research Institute’s (IFPRI) early advocacy for “codes of conduct”; the World Bank’s “principles for responsible agricultural investments” (RAI); the UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO) Voluntary Guidelines; and calls to stop land grabbing by La Vía Campesina and its allies, among others. Other proposals have emphasized transparency and

community consultation in land investments. The differences between these diverse positions can be significant. They reflect three main tendencies, which have far-reaching political implications.

1. Regulate to Facilitate Land Deals

The first tendency assumes that large-scale land deals are essentially a desirable phenomenon in which states and the corporate sector have become interested in land (again).² This is based on the assumption that there is a large quantity of marginal, empty land in the world—estimated at 445 million hectares (approx. 1.09 billion acres) to 1.7 billion hectares (approx. 4.2 billion acres)—that can be made available to investors in order to address the multiple food-energy-financial-climate crises.³ Within this tendency, it is assumed that positive outcomes of land deals can be achieved when such deals are carried out *well*. Part of the excitement in this camp is linked to the rise of flex crops, which is attracting investor interest.

Proponents of a “regulate to facilitate land deals” approach view governance primarily from an administrative and technical perspective—for instance, advocating for faster, cheaper and clearer land titling processes. They support strengthened property rights, environmental and labor standards, greater community consultation and the use of some international governance instruments such as transparency mechanisms insofar as they facilitate capital accumulation within an efficient institutional context. This position is linked to the changing role of the state, as described above. Mainstream economists who do not usually like the state coming into the picture are now calling for state involvement to facilitate the identification, quantification, acquisition and reallocation of so-called available, marginal lands to investors.

2. Regulate to Mitigate Negative Impacts

Many groups, NGOs, aid donors, international development agencies and community organizations may be included of this second tendency. It is based on the twin assumptions of the “inevitability” of large-scale land deals and the “impossibility” of redistributive land reform and rural development policies to promote

Proponents of a “regulate to facilitate land deals” approach support the use of some international governance instruments such as transparency mechanisms insofar as they facilitate capital accumulation.

small-scale farming-based development. Land deals—and the linking of small farmers to the corporate sector— may also be seen as a welcome development in the midst of state neglect of rural development.

However, in contrast to the first current that clearly deploys international governance instruments to advance land deals, the second tendency uses them to address urgent tactical considerations: to mitigate negative impacts and maximize opportunities. Regular reports and policy positions from Oxfam are examples of this.⁴ Within this political tendency, the role of the state is identified as mitigating risks and harnessing opportunities: enforceable rules that prevent expulsion of people from their land, delivering promised jobs and so on. This tendency is invested in global standards and “best practices” to provide benchmarks for what states should do.

It is the urgency of the “here and now” and the need for immediate concrete solutions that inspires and mobilizes groups and individuals around the second tendency. Thus, in contrast to what seems to be a more strategic thinking underpinning the first tendency, this second current is more tactical: it is primarily concerned with what is happening now and what can be done to protect poor people.

3. Regulate to Stop and Roll Back

The third tendency is the “stop and roll back land grabbing” position. The fundamental assumption in this tendency is that the contemporary expansion of production for food, biofuels, feed and other crops is not really meant to end global hunger, poverty and environmental degradation, but rather to further capital accumulation for the insatiable corporate hunger for profits. For this camp, capital accumulation advances a development model based on large-scale, fossil fuel-

Alongside the call to roll back land grabbing is the call for an alternative—the most popular alternative being food sovereignty.

based, industrial monocrop plantations that expel people from their lands and degrades the environment. This camp's starting point is a stand against capitalism, often bringing in a strong anti-imperialist and anti-neocolonial dimension in its position. It sees the rise of flex crops more as a threat than an opportunity.

Like the first two tendencies, this third current is also linked to the changing role of the state, although in this case the appeal is for the state to intervene more forcefully on behalf of poor peasants. However, it is framed in a radically different way from the first two tendencies: it deploys international governance instruments, but in order to “expose and oppose,” stop and roll back land grabbing. As stated by the Global Alliance Against Land Grabbing convened by La Vía Campesina and its allies in November 2011 in Mali:

Land grabbing is a global phenomenon initiated by local and transnational elites, governments and multinational companies in order to control the most precious resources in the world. 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 or indigenous peoples... Our land and identities 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.⁵

The third tendency is, like the first tendency, a strategic perspective, as if to say, “This is not the kind of development we want. Another development is possible.” Hence, alongside the call to roll back land

grabbing is the call for an alternative—the most popular alternative being food sovereignty.

What Does the Future Hold?

What we have at the moment and what we are likely to witness in the future is a three-way political battle among these tendencies to control the character, parameters and discourse— as well as the instruments and practice—of global governance of land grabbing.

However, the political stands of state and non-state actors are dynamic, often straddling two or three tendencies depending on the particular configuration of issues and alliances over time. For example, the first two tendencies share several common features. Both tend to emphasize *procedural* issues and governance: they want land deals to be done with proper procedures. Under these first two tendencies, it is reasonable to expect that land grabs will continue, but that the *manner* in which they occur may change: from non-transparent and non-consultative to transparent and consultative land grabs—but land grabs nonetheless.

There are major dilemmas within and between the second and third tendencies. The “regulate to mitigate negative impacts” tendency holds a grave concern about “here and now” issues (expulsion of people from their land, shady land deals, etc.) placing them in a very good *tactical* policy position. However, this tendency risks winning tactical battles while losing the larger strategic war over development paradigms.



Photo by CIAT International Center for Tropical Agriculture

Meanwhile, the “stop and rollback” tendency addresses *competing development models*, emphasizing questions around the *substance and meaning* of land deals. It is focused on explaining why there is global land grabbing, why we should oppose it and why it is important to think of strategic alternatives. However, it is relatively less concerned with tactical issues such as transparency instruments or labor standards in the emerging plantation enclaves. These issues are important mechanisms for mass mobilizations and campaigns, which need tactical foci in order to agitate and sustain mass participation. Campaigns that are very strategic in nature—advanced mainly via broad issues and master frames—may, at best, bring the issue onto the official agendas and occasional news but are unlikely to create substantial reforms.

The dilemma, then, is that the “regulate to mitigate” tendency remains quite popular but overly tactical in its work, while the “regulate to stop and rollback” tendency remains least funded and relatively politically isolated without much of a tactical component. If the first and second political tendencies remain allied, land grabbing is likely to continue with only changes in how it is executed. Substantial changes in the current large-scale land investments are only likely to occur through the combination of strategic and tactical issues and political master frames. *This requires alliances between key actors in the second and third tendencies.* Tension

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and conflict are likely to mark such an alliance because of the differences in their histories, class bases, ideological frameworks and political perspectives.

Whether (trans)national agrarian movements and their allies will be able to influence global governance instruments will depend partly on how they are able to (re)frame their political actions around land grabbing. Such a reframing would need to address some of the disconnect that exists between the changing global context and the movements’ master frames. For example, campaigns around oil palm and land grabbing remain framed around biofuels—a politically weak framing given the emergence of flex crops. Biofuels as a master frame thus needs to be critically re-assessed. Similarly, land reform remains a key demand put forward in response to land grabbing, even though many land grab sites involve lands that were previously redistributed to small farmers via land reforms; and many land grabs occur in indigenous peoples’ lands where the historic demand has never been land reform. Hence, land reform too needs to be critically re-assessed as a master frame. Meanwhile, many international campaigns remain narrowly focused on conventional principal targets (e.g. North Atlantic-based TNCs and governments), while integrating BRICS and MICs as campaign targets would be a crucial first step toward carrying out more effective advocacy campaigns within this new global political-economic context.

Each of these tasks will need attention if agrarian, environmental and human rights movements are to effectively increase their influence in global governance around land grabbing.



Photo by Sven Torfinn/Panos Pictures/Action Aid

NOTES:

1. Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and Forest Degradation program of the United Nations
2. Deininger, K. 2011. "Challenges posed by the new wave of farmland investment." *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(2), 217-247.
3. World Bank. 2010. *Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can it yield sustainable and equitable results?* Washington DC: World Bank.
4. See for example: Oxfam. 2011. *Land and Power: the Growing Scandal Surrounding the New Wave of Investments in Land*. Oxford: Oxfam International; and Oxfam. 2012. *Our Lands, Our Lives: Time Out on the Global Land Rush*. Oxford: Oxfam International.
5. Vía Campesina. 2012. *La Vía Campesina Notebook No. 3: International Conference of Peasant and Farmers: Stop Land Grabbing!* Jakarta: La Vía Campesina, April 2012, pp. 21-22.



Photo by Climate Justice Now