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Towards a better understanding of global land grabbing: an editorial introduction

Saturnino M. Borras Jr., Ruth Hall, Ian Scoones, Ben White and Wendy Wolford

Keywords: land grab; biofuels; dispossession; large-scale land investments

Over the past several years, the convergence of global crises in food, energy, finance, and the environment has driven a dramatic revaluation of land ownership. Powerful transnational and national economic actors from corporations to national governments and private equity funds have searched for ‘empty’ land often in distant countries that can serve as sites for fuel and food production in the event of future price spikes. This is occurring globally, but there is a clear North–South dynamic that echoes the land grabs that underwrote both colonialism and imperialism. In addition, however, there is an emerging ‘South–South’ dynamic today, with economically powerful non-Northern countries, such as Brazil and Qatar, getting significantly involved. The land—and water and labor—of the Global South are increasingly perceived as sources of alternative energy production (primarily biofuels), food crops, mineral deposits (new and old), and reservoirs of environmental services. National governments have looked inward as well, in what is often internal colonialism whereby land seen officially as marginal or empty is set aside for commodity production. The pace and extent of these land deals has been rapid and widespread (GRAIN 2008). Estimates by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) suggest that roughly 20 million hectares exchanged hands in the form of land grabs between 2005 and 2009 (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009). The World Bank report on land grabs (or, as the Bank calls it, agricultural investment), released in September 2010, estimated this global phenomenon at 45 million hectares (World Bank 2010). Sub-Saharan Africa is the site of the most speculative major land deals, including one thwarted deal in Madagascar that brought down the government (Cotula *et al.* 2009), while major areas are being targeted for commodity crops, fuel crops, investment, and ecosystem services in South America, Central America, Southeast Asia, and the former USSR (Zoomers 2010, Visser and Spoor 2011). There are various mechanisms through which land grabbing occurs, ranging from straightforward private–private purchases and public–private leases for biofuel production to acquisition of large parcels of land for conservation arrangement, with variegated initial outcomes (Hall 2011, Wolford 2010). Some of this land has been cleared of existing inhabitants and users but not yet put into production; in many cases buyers and investors are simply preparing for the next global crisis.

The phrase ‘global land grab’ has become a catch-all to describe and analyze the current explosion of large scale (trans)national commercial land transactions. Around the world, there have been strong reactions from states, corporations, and civil society groups. Some see land grabs as a major threat to the lives and livelihoods of the rural poor, and so oppose such commercial land deals. Others see economic opportunity for the rural poor, although they are wary of corruption and negative consequences, and so call for improving land market governance. Of course, between these two positions is a range of intermediate views offered by other groups (see Borras 2010).

One of the most ambitious studies of the rise in global land grabs to date, the World Bank report (innocuously titled *Rising global interest in farmland: can it yield sustainable and equitable benefits?*) (World Bank 2010) seems to incorporate all of the different positions. The report caused considerable controversy and was embargoed for several months before being released. The Bank clearly shows that land grabs have taken place largely in places where buyers could exploit corrupt or indebted governments with little ability to regulate the transaction or prevent buyers from targeting the poorest rural communities, expelling people with non-traditional land title from their land. At the same time, the Bank analyzes what it called ‘yield gaps’, where productive investment might exploit high arable land to yield ratios. Not surprisingly, the press described the report in contradictory ways. The *Financial Times*, for example, wrote under the headline ‘World Bank backs farmland investment’, while *Bloomberg* reported the World Bank as arguing that, ‘Large land deals threaten farmers’. At the end of the report, the Bank provides guidelines—seven ‘principles for responsible agricultural investment’—that the Bank argues will help to correct the deficiencies of land grabs. These high-sounding but voluntary principles include, for example, the expectation that new investments recognize and respect existing rights to land and natural resources, as well as generate desirable social and distributional impacts. The set of principles, however, are not embedded in a political analysis of how they might actually work in practice. In the end, while thorough, the World Bank report does not address the fundamentally important questions of who wins, who loses and *why*, and what are the social, political, and ecological drivers and consequences of these processes?

In this context, in-depth and systematic enquiry that takes into account the political economy, sociology and ecology of contemporary land deals is urgently needed. It is for this reason that the five of us came together and launched the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI), a loose research and action network that brings together four institutions: the Futures Agriculture Consortium (FAC) hosted by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) of the University of Sussex; the Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS) hosted by the Resources, Environment and Livelihoods (RELIVE) Research Cluster of the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague; the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) of the University of the Western Cape in South Africa; and the Polson Institute for Global Development of Cornell University in the United States. Except for Ben White, all of us are members of the editorial team of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (*JPS*). Thus there is solid basis for collaboration between the LDPI and *JPS* on this theme, leading to fruitful initiatives such as this *JPS* Forum on Global Land Grabbing featuring Klaus Deininger, Olivier de Schutter, and Tania Li. The Forum joins the *JPS* special issue on ‘Biofuels, Land and Agrarian Change’ (with 16 articles) released in October 2010 with Philip

McMichael and Ian Scoones as guest editors (McMichael and Scoones 2010), and the forthcoming (July 2011) *JPS* special issue entitled ‘What difference does land control make? Shifting agrarian environments and the reorientation of land governance practices’ with Nancy Lee Peluso and Christian Lund as guest editors (Peluso and Lund forthcoming), as well as multiple publications on land grabbing scheduled to be published in 2012.

We envision the current LDPI–*JPS* initiative as a means to study the extent, nature, and impact of large-scale land deals that involve changes in land use and land property relations through land purchases, land leases, and contract farming, among others. The objective is to provide a platform and network to generate solid evidence through detailed, field-based research that incorporates and complements a range of policy-oriented donor and NGO-led reviews, as well as more activist political work. We hope to build a public database with different viewpoints, studies and surveys outlining the extent, nature, and impact of changes in land use and land property relations around the world. We will focus, ultimately, on the politics of land deals – something often lacking in the current debate – and therefore we embed the commercial act of exchanging land titles into a broader framework concerned with ‘land deal politics’. Through this initiative, we hope to foster a dialogue with social movements, activists, policy makers, and concerned academics to produce data and debate potential implications.

In the LDPI we aim to generate a broad framework encompassing the political economy, political ecology, and political sociology of land deals centered on food, biofuels, minerals, and conservation. Working within the broad analytical lenses of these three fields, we are guided by four key questions in agrarian political economy outlined by Henry Bernstein (2010): (i) who owns what (ii) who does what (iii) who gets what and (iv) what do they do with the surplus wealth that has been created? We will add two additional key questions, highlighting political dynamics between social groups and classes: (v) what do they do to each other and (vi) how are political changes shaped by dynamic ecologies, and vice versa? We will gather data at the global level as well as through detailed in-depth case studies in order to address several big picture questions outlined below. We see our work as building relevant and useful analyses that will be critical in two senses: on the one hand, critical of simplistic mainstream interpretations and policy prescriptions inspired by techno-economic optimism as well as administrative managerialism, and on the other hand, critical of naïve populisms not based in socially differentiated local realities. We endeavor to contribute to constructing a sophisticated analytical approach to land grabbing that recognizes potential benefits as well as risks, and situates both in localized contexts.

As an initial step, we are gathering data through meta-reviews of the literature to try and understand what is already known about the scope of changes in land use and land–property relations worldwide. We are simultaneously encouraging and generating data within national and local contexts to answer the initial questions of: what is happening (what land is changing hands and where), who is engaged in land deals, how are the deals enacted (what are the legal, political and bureaucratic mechanisms that govern transactions), for what purpose (what are the ostensible rationales for these land deals)? Conducting detailed case studies that analyze the effects—economic, political, ecological, and more—of changes in land use and land property relations will, in turn, help us broach a broader set of ‘so what?’ questions, exploring practical and policy alternatives to the current pattern of land deals.

Some of the most urgent and strategic questions include: (i) What changes in broad agrarian structures are emerging? Are these new forms of agrarian capitalism or repeats of the past? (ii) What is the nature and extent of rural social differentiation—in terms of class, gender, ethnicity—following changes in land use and land property relations as well as organizations of production and exchange? (iii) Have land deals undermined local level and national food security? How and to what extent? What have been the socially differentiated impacts on livelihoods by class, gender, and ethnicity? (iv) To what extent have agrarian political struggles been provoked by the new land investment dynamics? What are the issues that unite or divide the rural poor, organized movements, and rural communities around the issue of land deals? (v) What are the various competing policy and political narratives and discourses around the multiple crises of food, energy, climate, and finance, and how have these shaped and been reshaped by the land deal politics? How and to what extent has financial speculation played a role in land deals in the context of the convergence of food, fuels, climate, and finance crises? What narratives exist around ‘investment, growth, and modernization’ versus ‘marginalization, displacement, and impoverishment’, and so on? (vi) How have competing frameworks and views on land property been deployed by various camps around the contested meanings of ‘marginal lands’ (or, ‘idle’, ‘waste’, ‘unoccupied’ lands)? (vii) What are the emerging trends around dynamics of power, elites, and corruption; land as a source of patronage? How can we make sense of the politics of land deals in different contexts? (viii) Have development-induced displacement and dispossession occurred? How and to what extent and with what immediate and long-term outcomes and implications for rural livelihoods, including new rural refugees or internally displaced peoples (IDPs)? (ix) Have global land policies of different overseas development agencies, namely, World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), European Union (EU), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and so on, contributed to facilitating/encouraging or blocking/discouraging land deals? What are the limitations of ‘code of conduct’, certification, regulation, information dissemination, and capacity-building strategies? (x) What are the dynamics of international politics of land grabs in the broader context of energy, mining, forestry, and conservation; and the role of big capital and powerful interests? (xi) How important is the transnational character of land grabs? Why is it important? from whose point of view? (xii) How are these deals discursively justified and legitimized, and, in turn, challenged and opposed? (xiii) What are the forms of local response (which may include both resisting and welcoming the presence of new investors), how is resistance organized, and has land been successfully ‘grabbed back’? (xiv) What are some of the relevant emerging alternatives from key actors? Are some of the traditional policies such as land reform, and some of the more recent alternative visions such as ‘food sovereignty’ (and ‘land sovereignty’) relevant and useful in protecting and promoting the interest of the rural poor in the midst of these (trans)national commercial land deals? (xv) If corporate land acquisition continues to expand on a large scale, what are the longer-term implications for the future of farming and the environment?

The questions raised above all link to broader issues that have long been discussed in agrarian studies, such as the tendency of large-scale plantations and contract-farming to be situated in pockets of persistent poverty (Beckford 1972, Little and Watts 1994). This is not to argue that wage-work in large-scale agriculture, or contract farming for agribusiness, are always impoverishing—why should they be,

if labor and farmers are well-organized and their rights, claims, and contracts are actively promoted and protected by government and the legal system? But under current conditions there are grounds for serious concern about the quality of employment in corporate production, both for plantation wage-workers and contracted outgrowers (see White 2010, White and Dasgupta 2010).

In the interest of contributing towards some of the difficult questions outlined above the LDPI, in collaboration with *JPS*, has organized an international conference on land grabbing to be held at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex on 6–8 April 2011. The response to our call for papers was overwhelming. Three-hundred forty abstracts were submitted, many of which addressed the questions outlined above in fine-grained detail. In the end, the conference venue could only accommodate 120 workshop participants, so we are planning to hold more workshops after April 2011. We expect vibrant discussions and debates on the politics of global land grabbing during the April 2011 conference and beyond.

With all of that in mind, the current *JPS* Forum serves as a sort of warm-up, a prelude to the April 2011 LDPI-*JPS* conference. This is a small forum, with only three contributors—but the three represent some of the key perspectives on land issues.

Klaus Deininger, a lead economist at the World Bank, is an important figure in the land policy and development world. He is the lead author of the World Bank's 2003 land policy report (World Bank 2003) that introduced important revisions in official land policy thinking within the World Bank, as well as the September 2010 World Bank report on land grabbing. Deininger elaborates on his ideas about the risks of and potential benefits from large-scale land investments, focusing on institutional reforms (e.g. the 'principles of responsible agricultural investments') that are required in order to harness the potential of land investments.¹ The World Bank position on regulating land grabbing is supported by several multilateral development institutions. The original formulation of the Principles of Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) released in early 2010 is actually a joint undertaking and position by the World Bank, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and UNCTAD. The 'code of conduct' advocacy by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI, is a member of the CGIAR), is essentially the same as the collective position by these agencies (see von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009). In his contribution to this forum, Deininger advances three key conclusions: (1) the large size of the areas that could potentially change hands, the concentration of such land in few countries, and the fact that there appears to be significant interest in countries with weak governance, all imply that the risks associated with such investments are immense, (2) while it does present challenges, heightened investor interest also provides large opportunities and (3) while making the necessary institutional arrangements is a responsibility of governments in target countries, a pervasive lack of reliable information on opportunities, actual transfers, and the impact of large-scale investments can lead to negative impacts.

Olivier de Schutter, the UN Rapporteur for the Right to Food, and Professor of Law and Human Rights at the Catholic University of Louvain, is an important figure in policy circles. He has consistently focused on the rural poor and promoted

¹But see Borras and Franco (2010) for an initial critique.

the cause of small family farms in the context of contemporary debates on land grabbing. He has framed his various papers—official UN reports, academic articles, or essays for media—from a human rights perspective and in so doing has contributed significantly to the debate (see, e.g. De Schutter 2010a, 2010b). De Schutter has been critical of the World Bank-led position that gravitates around ‘managing risks while harnessing opportunities’, and in his work as UN Special Rapporteur, he has put forward a proposal for ‘Minimum Human Rights Principles’ to the UN Human Rights Council. For him, ‘these are *minimum* principles in the sense that ‘a large-scale investment in land will not necessarily be justified, even though it may comply with the various principles listed [in the RAI principles]’. Important (trans)national agrarian movements and NGOs have found him to be a key ally. For example, La Via Campesina, the IPC for Food Sovereignty, and others have invoked de Schutter’s minimum human rights principles, while also supporting and promoting the FAO-led ‘Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land and Other Natural Resources’.

Finally, Tania Murray Li, Canada Research Chair and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto, is a key figure in critical academic and activist circles focused on agrarian issues. She works with a nuanced political economy framework to analyze land issues and dispossession. She critiques mainstream thinking, bringing the question of labor at the center of her analysis. Framing her critical questions within the broader context of ‘when the land is needed, but the people are not’, Li highlights the consequences of policies that foreground ‘security’ for some, while leaving others without shelter, food, or the means of (re)production. Like de Schutter, Li is not convinced by the argument in favor of code of conduct regulatory measures to make land investments ‘pro-poor’. She argues that, where safeguards have been effectively put in place for the rural poor, they have been the result of political organization and social mobilization: ‘Without such struggles, and such settlements, even the most assiduous regulatory regime has no purchase’, she observes (Li 2011).

These highlights of the three forum contributions constitute a small fraction of the themes discussed in the papers which follow. We hope that the forum will inspire and provoke deeper rethinking and contribute towards a more meaningful and productive debate around global land grabbing, rooted in grounded and nuanced analysis, within academic, activist, policy, and political circles.

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