

Land and Resources

A global wave of land and water grabs is concentrating farmland and other food producing resources in the hands of a few, with serious consequences for both rural and urban communities, especially for small farmers, fishers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, women and communities of color.



Land deals are occurring in areas of longstanding inequity, racism and conflict. They involve real estate speculation, mining, agrofuels, industrial forestry and “flex crop” production for export, often led by local elites and regional companies.¹ Global institutional investors view agricultural land as an \$8.4 trillion market (of which they now own an estimated \$30-40 billion). Many claim they are working to solve the world’s food, fuel and climate problems, or that their acquisitions are needed for agricultural investment.

However, none of the estimated 83 million hectares grabbed since global food prices spiked in 2007 are serving the livelihoods and needs of the people actually living on them. While the market views it as a tradeable commodity, land is also a social space. It is a place of neighborhood, culture, livelihood and, for many indigenous people, territorial history. Land grabbing drives people from their land, compromises their agency over their homes, and ultimately cuts them off from access to land (and water) based resources.

The proximate causes of the phenomenon— or at least the ones that make media headlines— all cite global scarcities of food, fuel and water as drivers for the global land rush. But this assumes scarcity to be a “natural” consequence of overpopulation. It does not explain scarcity’s intrinsic connection to inequitable economic growth. It does not explain how land grabs actually happen, why they only happen to poor and marginalized communities, or why they are often facilitated by public institutions. Essentially, land grabs benefit the few at the cost of the many.

Food becomes scarce through crises. In a crisis, prices are inflated, deflated and manipulated through hoarding and speculative bubbles. This creates market volatility; a sort of “flexible scarcity” that allows those with the most market power—primarily oligopolies that corner buying and selling—to make money on the rise and fall of prices. The overall trend in price is steadily upward (that’s what makes it a crisis), which favors more speculation and hoarding. All of this has led to a spectacular rise in the price of land worldwide, fuelling the global land rush. Land’s financial value is outpacing its productive value, meaning it is worth more for that it sell for than what it can produce. Consequently, few land grabs actually lead to productive projects, leading many observers to ask if the land rush is not just one gigantic, speculative bubble.

Land grabs can also go beyond access to physical acreage to involve other resources. Water grabbing, for instance, reallocates water resources to someone’s benefit at the expense of previous local users or the ecosystems upon which those users’ livelihoods are based. It involves the capturing of the decision-making power around water, including the power to decide how and for what purposes water resources are used now and in the future. Thinking of water grabbing as a form of control grabbing means going beyond the narrow, proceduralist definition of “grabbing” as “illegal appropriation” since the means by which new powerful actors gain and maintain access to and benefit



Photo by Hugo Valiente

from water resources often involve legal but illegitimate dynamics.

So, what can be done? Land and water grabs use existing frameworks of power to build and consolidate more power and capital; they are not just about profits, but are also about grabbing power itself. As a result, resistance is ruthlessly repressed. The challenge is thus to build community power before being preyed upon for land. This requires a proactive strategy that advances alternative land and livelihood projects while building broad alliances that protect vulnerable communities from resource dispossession. It also requires community vigilance against the political, economic and infrastructure changes that precedes land grabbing. It requires a strategy for territorial land sovereignty.

Land sovereignty is the right of communities and peoples to sustainable, land-based livelihoods; their right to have a democratic say in its use and an equitable share in the stream of social, environmental and economic benefits of the land where they live. It is a strategy of resistance in the face of territorial restructuring. From the peasant cooperatives of the Aguán Valley in Honduras to the urban gardens of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, people are busy, building local alternatives and community control over their spaces and places. In order to stand up to the global land rush, they will also need regional, national and international alliances with everyone truly concerned with ending the injustices that cause hunger. building local alternatives and community control over their spaces and places. In order to stand up to the global land rush, they will also need regional, national and international alliances with everyone truly concerned with ending the injustices that cause hunger.

¹ The term "flex crops" refers to crops such as soy, sugarcane, and palm oil that have many potential uses (e.g. food, feed, fuel) and can thus be sold in whatever form fetches the highest market price.

Dig Deeper:

Eric Holt-Giménez, "This Land is Whose Land? Dispossession, Resistance and Reform in the United States," Food First Backgrounder Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 2014.

Madeleine Fairbairn, "Farmland Meets Finance: Is Land the New Economic Bubble?" Land and Sovereignty in the Americas Issue Brief No. 5, Food First and TNI, 2014.

Tanya M. Kerssen, *Grabbing Power: The New Struggle for Land, Food and Democracy in Northern Honduras*, Food First Books, 2013.

Santurnino M. Borrás, Jennifer Franco, and Chunyu Wang, "Governing the Global Land Grab: Competing political tendencies" Land and Sovereignty in the Americas Issue Brief No. 2, Food First and TNI, 2013.

Santurnino M. Borrás and Jennifer C. Franco, "A Land Sovereignty Alternative? Toward a peoples' counter-enclosure," TNI, July 2012.

Jennifer Franco, Satoko Kishimoto, Sylvia Kay, Timothé Deodoroff, and Gloria Pracucci, "The Global Water Grab: A Primer," TNI, July 2012.

James Fairhead, Melissa Leach, and Ian Scoones, "Green Grabbing: A New Appropriation of Nature?" *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2012.



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