

Competing Views and Strategies on Global Land Grabbing

Transnational Institute and International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty side event, 6-8pm, 12 October

Short bios and highlights of presentations

Presentation 1) Alternative perspectives on land grabbing and biofuels: Exploring the implications for policy

Ian Scoones - Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, UK. Co-convenor of the Future Agricultures Consortium (www.future-agricultures.org) and co-director of the STEPS Centre (www.steps-centre.org). Ian is a member of the editorial collective of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and is a founder-member of the Land Deal Politics Initiative. He is co-editor of the recent *JPS* special issue on the politics of biofuels, land and agrarian change. His most recent book is *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths and Reality* (James Currey, Oxford).

Ian's presentation will identify three contrasting narratives which define the current debate about 'land grabbing' and biofuels: a techno-optimist position, an administrative-managerial position and a localist-environmental position. Each suggests different responses to the growing phenomenon of large-scale land deals for biofuels. The presentation will briefly examine the World Bank's position as laid out in the recent report, *Rising Global Interest in Farmland*, and touch on contrasting proposals for land governance currently being discussed. Drawing on cases presented in the recent special issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* on the politics of biofuels, land and agrarian change, the presentation will examine the terms of incorporation in biofuel-driven land deals, highlighting that who wins and who loses depends very much on local negotiations and political economy. The potentials for realising the ideals of governance models which assume high levels of transparency, accountability and capacity is questioned. The presentation will argue that a re-framing of the debate is required which focuses on local rights to food, land and livelihoods, of both farmers and labourers, and the importance of developing capacities to defend these through citizen action and mobilisation.

Presentation 2) Land grabbing and the agro-food complex

Philip McMichael - International Professor of Development Sociology, Cornell University. Current research is on agrarian movements, land questions and food regimes. Author of *Settlers and the Agrarian Question* (1984) and *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective* (2008), he has also edited *The Global Restructuring of Agro-Food Systems* (1994), *Food and Agrarian Systems in the World Economy* (1995), *New Directions in the Sociology of Global Development* (2005, with F. H. Buttel), and *Contesting Development: Critical Struggles for Social Change* (2010). He has worked with the FAO, La Vía Campesina, and the IPC for Food Sovereignty. He recently prepared a 35,000 word document on the global food crisis for the UNRISD Flagship Report: *Combating Poverty and Inequality*¹ (2006-10).

Land acquisition for offshore food production signals a critical threshold in the international food regime. Formerly food security was conceived as a function of the

global economy, where 'breadbasket' regions would supply food insecure populations via 'free trade' managed by transnational corporations. Now states and investors grabbing land are constructing a new 'security mercantilism,' beyond the market, to guarantee food supplies for consumer populations at the expense of the food insecure. This new form of enclosure is an expression of crisis: in the food regime in particular, but in international political economy in general -- as indebted states lease and sell (contested or common) land to investors, and development agencies sponsor agro-exporting in the name of deepening the smallholder 'outgrower' model as 'agriculture-for-development,' and as a response to the continuing global food crisis.

Presentation 3) 'Who will own the countryside?' -Land grabbing' and the future of farming in Southeast Asia

Ben White - Professor of Rural Sociology at the Institute of Social studies, the Hague and professor of Social Sciences at University of Amsterdam. He has been involved in teaching and research on agrarian and rural development issues for more than 30 years, with a research focus primarily on Indonesia. He has published many books and articles on agrarian history, land tenure, rural poverty, contract farming and the rural non-farm economy. Latest publication: '*Agrofuels capitalism: a view from political economy*', Journal of Peasant Studies October 2010.

Southeast Asia like other regions of the global south has a long history of land 'grabbing' by local elites, colonial governments and foreign or domestic corporations, mainly for export production. In recent decades both governments and civil society groups attempted to correct some of these historical distortions by the breaking up of large estates and re-distribution to smallholders (in some cases with World Bank support) Paradoxically these policies are now reversed as governments support the purchase or long-term lease of large expanses of land by large corporations, both foreign and domestic. In nearly all cases the land appropriated in this way is the subject of contestation (in the framework of still-to-be-implemented land reform, in the context of customary rights vs. state claims to ownership, etc.). Cultivators on these lands, with traditional/informal and insecure tenure, are extremely vulnerable in the face of transnational or domestic corporate land grabbing. Governments and their foreign partners justify the corporate appropriation of contested land with the use of discursive tools portraying the land in question as "unused", "unproductive" etc. The agro-industrial groups involved in these deals are "among the most ruthless in the world in terms of environmental destruction, labour conditions and human rights abuses" (Ernsting 2007). National (state-sponsored) farmer's organisations have not been active in protecting small-farmer and farm-worker rights in the face of large-scale agro-industrial development. Local agrarian movements are weak. The experience of oil-palm expansion (based on both foreign and domestic capital) in the last two decades – both before and after the establishment of the CSR-oriented "Round Table on Sustainable" half way through this period – is no ground for optimism on the capacity of corporate "codes of conduct" to protect the interests of local cultivators, gender rights and the environment. The current debate about "land grabbing" is in fact a debate about the future shape of farming and the fate of rural populations. Will Michal Kalecki's (1967) prediction be fulfilled, that despite the apparent resilience of "intermediate classes" in agriculture, sooner or later we will see their "final submission ... to the interests of big business"? What kind of future lies ahead for the next generation in rural areas? Will they still have the option, and the necessary support, to engage in

environmentally sound, small scale, commercial mixed farming? Or will they face only the choice to become poorly-paid wage workers or impoverished contract farmers in an endless landscape of monocrop food or fuel stock plantations, or to move to Southeast Asia's already crowded cities?

Presentation 4) Land grabbing in the former USSR, Central Asia and Eastern Europe: the world's largest agricultural land reserves at stake

Oane Visser - assistant professor, dept. of Anthropology and Development Studies at Radboud University the Netherlands. He has conducted extensive research on agriculture in the former Soviet Union, and Russia in particular, published in journals like *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Focaal*, *Europe-Asia Studies*. His most recent (joint) publication, on land grabbing is; Oane Visser and Max Spoor (2011) '*Land grabbing in post-Soviet Eurasia: the world's largest agricultural land reserves at stake*', forthcoming in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (38) 1.

Land grabbing has received considerable attention worldwide and in Africa in particular, while land grabbing in the former Soviet Union, Central Asia and Eastern Europe has gone largely unnoticed. However, domestic and foreign state and private companies are acquiring vast areas of farmland also in this region. It is remarkable that land acquisitions in the under-used (and often unused) land masses of post-Soviet Eurasia have practically been ignored. The more so since this former breadbasket of the 19th and early 20th century contains so much fertile and well-endowed agricultural land. Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Russia are one of the few countries in the world that have significant untapped capacity to make a major impact on meeting the growing global food demand. The large-scale farms in these countries (the former collective and state farms) were privatised in the 1990s, making the employees shareholders and land owners. Currently, the already colossal farm enterprises are bought up by global investors and combined into even larger agricultural companies of a scale probably unmatched in the world. Of the few agricultural producers large enough to be registered at a stock exchange, more than half are from the former Soviet Union. Whether the rural population will reap benefits of the large-scale land acquisitions is highly questionable. The collective farms and their successors traditionally provide a broad range of social services in rural community. An investor-led, narrow profit-oriented approach of curtailing such services might destroy the social fabric in the countryside. Further, weak law enforcement gives investors opportunities to arrange 'quick and dirty' land deals acquiring large tracts of land through bypassing official regulations, exploiting the knowledge gap vis-à-vis the local population regarding land regulations, and infringing on the rights of the local landholders. Therefore, large-scale land grabs of questionable nature are expected to occur increasingly. Even the moratorium on land sales in Ukraine hardly slows down the de facto change of ownership from local shareholders to large foreign agroholdings.

Presentation 5) Land Grabbing in Africa

Presenter: Ruth Hall - senior researcher at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa - the leading land rights and agrarian reform research institution in the region. She has studied at the University of Cape Town and at the University of Oxford, where she is completing her doctoral degree in Politics. She coordinates the work of the Future Agricultures Consortium on land rights in Africa, and convenes the Land Deal Politics Initiative's

research programme on commercial land deals in Africa. She participated in the process to develop the Africa Union Land Policy Guidelines and has recently been analysing the regional dynamics of transnational agricultural investments in Southern Africa. Over the past 15 years, Ruth's work has focused on land reforms and land rights in South Africa and elsewhere. She has led several national research and advocacy projects, published widely, advised government on land and agricultural policy, established partnerships with civil society organisations, and become a leading analyst and commentator on land and agrarian reform in the region. She has authored over 20 journal articles and book chapters, and her most recent book is *Land, Memory, reconstruction, and Justice: Perspectives on Land Claims in South Africa* (2010).

Available studies suggest that Africa has become the global centre of land grabbing in the recent period following spikes in oil and food commodity prices, and by some estimates as much as 70% of land acquired through such deals globally in the past year have taken place in Africa. Commercial land deals range from many small leases of below 1,000 hectares to mega-deals over a million hectares. Commercial land deals have prompted widespread displacement of local people and their land uses, largely in the form of smallholder agriculture, grazing and natural resource harvesting, despite claims that transacted land is idle or unoccupied – a discourse promoted by investment brokers, financiers and other intermediaries. The dominance of customary tenure regimes in Africa combined with inadequate protection of such rights in law and practice means that, where such transactions are legal in terms of national statutes, it is national governments rather than investors that are doing the grabbing. What is being grabbed is not only land but also water, minerals, forests, marine and other natural resources - and the cheap labour with which to exploit these. Production of food for foreign markets accounts for some new land uses, but biofuels are as or more significant in some regions. This rush of investors has contributed to reversals in long-term efforts to confront the legacy of colonialism and redistribute access to land in highly unequal societies, particularly in Southern Africa, and instead has prompted dramatic new (re)concentration of control over land by domestic and foreign companies and aggravating problems of rural poverty, landlessness and food insecurity, and underscoring the political grievance that arise from these.

Presentation 6) Contemporary Landgrabs: Dispossession and Displacement in Latin America

Presenter: Wendy Wolford - Polson Professor of Development Sociology in the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell University. She teaches and researches in the fields of political ecology, social movements, land reform, the politics of ethnography, and the struggle for land in Brazil. Recent publications include *This Land is Ours Now: Social Mobilization and the Meanings of Land in Brazil* (Duke University Press, 2010) as well as several articles and books chapters on social mobilization in Latin America, land reform and landless movements, and institutional ethnographies of land governance. She is a member of the editorial collectives for the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and *Antipode: A Journal of Radical Geography*, as well as a member of the Land Deal Politics Initiative.

Large-scale land and resource grabs have been and are today a prominent feature of Latin American development. New trends include the development of extractive corridors, widespread corporate investment in food and fuel production, speculative

investment, and modern forms of migration to take advantage of hemispheric differences in planting seasons, environmental protections and labor legislation to purchase vast farms. Such large-scale land deals reinforce the region's orientation towards export production and concomitant dependence on primary commodities. They aggravate environmental problems such as deforestation, soil degradation and water contamination and directly raise land prices, stalling hard-won promises of land reform and agrarian development. The rush to claim land foments the twin processes of dispossession and displacement among the most vulnerable people in the region: the rural poor, indigenous peoples or people with customary or "alternative" rights to the land, and women and children who often have no recognized rights. All of this, in turn, increases poverty, violence, inequality, hunger and urban informality. Countering these trends, social movements and local community organizations have come together to agitate for ongoing attention to land reform initiatives, a focus on local, short, fair and community-oriented markets, sustainable farming and policies that prioritize people. Their actions highlight the need for international governance tools such as the Voluntary Guidelines (VG) on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land and Other Natural Resources.