

## Land grabbing in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Land grabbing has gained momentum in Latin America and the Caribbean during the past decade. The phenomenon has taken different forms and character as compared to processes that occur in other regions of the world, especially Africa. It puts into question some of the assumptions in the emerging literature on land grabbing, suggesting these are too food-centered/too food crisis-centered, too land-centred, too centred on new global food regime players – China, South Korea, Gulf States and India – and too centred on Africa. There are four key mechanisms through which land grabbing in Latin American and the Caribbean has been carried out: food security initiatives, energy/fuel security ventures, other climate change mitigation strategies, and recent demands for resources from newer hubs of global capital. The hallmark of land grabbing in the region is its intra-regional character: the key investors are (Trans-)Latin American companies, often in alliance with international capital and the central state. Initial evidence suggests that recent land investments have consolidated the earlier trend away from (re)distributive land policies in most countries in the region, and are likely to result in widespread reconcentration of land and capital.

**Keywords:** intra-regional land grabbing; food-feed-fuel complex; dispossession

### Introduction

In the initial surge of reports and studies on contemporary land grabbing there is a dominant assumption that the phenomenon has occurred because of the 2007–2008 food crisis, which in turn was largely caused by the emerging global biofuels complex (the initial ‘food versus fuel’ view – see White and Dasgupta 2010). The changes in the global agrofood system made some financially powerful countries (primarily China, South Korea, and the Gulf States) that could not produce sufficient food domestically feel insecure. They started to seek control over large tracts of lands overseas to secure food supply (GRAIN 2008). The principal target is Africa where vast empty lands are thought to be available, cheaply. It is generally assumed that 70 percent of all lands that were grabbed, estimated by Oxfam to be 227 million hectares (ha) in 2011, are in Africa (Oxfam 2011). (Inter)national public policy-making aimed at addressing some of the serious concerns in the current land rush (expulsion of peasants from their land, corrupt land deals, and so on) has been underway and is politically contested.

These assumptions have been increasingly challenged. Visser and Spoor (2011) identify the former Soviet Eurasia, and Borrás and Franco (2011) Southeast Asia,

as important regional sites of land grabs too. Levien (2011) raises the issue of domestic land grabs, Sommerville (2011) on the perspective from the Global North. Other challenges have been raised by Amanor (2012) on the role of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and global commodity chains, Hall (2011) on pre-existing crop boom-bust cycles, McMichael (2012) on the location of land grabs in the restructuring of the global food regime, Woodhouse and Ganho (2011) and Kay and Franco (2012) on the water dimension of land grabbing, Hofman and Ho (2012) on an alternative view of Chinese land grabbers, Alden Wily (2012) on historical continuities, Li (2011) on centering labour in the debate, De Schutter (2011) on the right-to-food dimension, and Fairhead, Leach and Scoones (2012) on 'green grabbing' – land grabbing in the name of the environment. Peluso and Lund (2011) offer fresh analytical insights on new frontiers of land control more generally, while Cotula (2012) offers a useful comprehensive overview on key issues in current land grabs. In short, the current trajectory of scholarly thinking is to broaden the parameter of empirical and theoretical inquiry into land grabs. The emerging common thread is that there is a need to embed land grabs within our analysis of contemporary global capitalist development (Harvey 2003), in the specific context of the convergence of multiple crises: food, energy, climate change and finance capital (McMichael 2012, Sassen 2010).

We build on this emerging body of literature, and offer our contribution by bringing in fresh perspectives from Latin America and the Caribbean. We did a close reading of the FAO studies in 17 countries in the region, and came up with four main arguments. First, there are a number of key specific contexts that underpin current land grabs, and food production is just one of these. Others are energy/fuel (biofuels), other climate change mitigation strategies, and recent demands for resources destined to newly-emerged global hubs of capital. These are not unrelated contexts; a common thread among these is the dynamics of global capital reconfiguration and emerging accumulation imperatives and strategies. Financialization of these contextual processes is an emerging feature common to food, energy/fuel and other resource extraction. Hence, looking at food politics embedded within the dynamics of global capitalism (the Friedmann and McMichael 1989 formulation of 'food regime') is key, and logically links the former to other mechanisms of land grabbing. It broadens our unit of analysis, enabling us to go beyond analyzing the food security-induced land grabbing initiatives by China, India, South Korea and the Gulf States. In this context, we offer the concept of 'flex crops' – crops that have multiple and flexible uses – as a useful way of illustrating our point, i.e. in understanding the interconnection between and implications of the restructuring of agrofood, feed, and fuel complexes.

Second, land grabbing occurs in this region to an extent wider than previously assumed. When seen from a relational international perspective, it changes the relative shares of other regions, especially Africa, in global land grabbing. Third, refocusing our analysis on the key mechanisms of land grabbing (food, energy/fuel, and rising demands from newer hubs of global capital for natural resources), we see that the primary capital driving the land grab processes in this particular region seems to come from within the region itself: domestic capital and what others (e.g. Gomez 2011) call '(Trans-)Latina Companies'; in this paper, we will use the term '(Trans-)Latin American Companies' (TLCs). The actors in land grabbing under the spotlight in Africa – China, India, South Korea, Gulf

States – have marginal presence in the region in terms of agriculture FDI, at least for now. The hallmarks of land grabbing in the region are the ‘intra-regional’ character of the phenomenon that is comparatively more diverse, dynamic and larger in scale than the one observed by Hall (2012) in Africa with South African land grabbers, and the rise of flex crops. This provides us with some hints on the reconfiguration of global capital in general and the agrofood-feed-fuel complex more particularly.

Fourth, land grabbing has resulted in the expulsion of people from their lands – but not everywhere and not always. What we see in this region are pockets of expulsions, but the scale of them is relatively low. Incorporation of peasants, rural labourers and indigenous peoples into the emerging commercial farms, commodity chain, and industrial plantations are more common. Many of the land grab sites are in the agricultural frontiers and (former) cattle ranches that are relatively sparsely populated. In short, while land grabbing occurs in Latin America and the Caribbean within the same logic and processes of global capitalist development that underpinned land grabs elsewhere, it has taken different forms and character – and trajectories – in this region.

### **The limits of the original FAO study**

Our paper is based on the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) research on the state and trends in land grabbing in 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Baumeister 2011, Carrera and Carrera Campos 2011, Donoso 2011a, b, Echenique 2011, Galeano 2011, Lavandier 2011, Martínez 2011, Murmis and Murmis 2011, Piñeiro 2011, Remy and de los Rios 2011, Robles 2011, Salinas 2011, Urioste 2011, Wilkinson *et al.* 2011, A. Williams 2011, P. Williams 2011; and the summary paper, Gómez 2011). The studies were concluded in late 2011. The common analytical framework of the studies is both wide and narrow. On the one hand it is wide because it looks into the broad processes of rural land and capital concentration in the context of neoliberal globalization, along the lines of argument by Amanor (2012). On the other hand, it is narrow because it looks into the phenomenon of land grabbing strictly based on three specific dimensions, namely: (i) significant extent of recent large-scale land acquisitions; (ii) involvement of foreign governments in these land deals; and (iii) negative impact of such renewed land investments on food security of the recipient country. This framing is firmly located within the initial salvo of reports and studies on land grabbing that we explained above. It is due to the wide framing (in the context mentioned above) that most of the studies were able to uncover, gather and assemble significant empirical material related to recent land dynamics in the region. At the same time, however, authors of the 17 studies have to focus their analyses and conclusions based on the definition and dimension of land grabbing cited above, arriving at a conclusion that land grabbing exists *only* in two countries in the region: Argentina and Brazil (in contrast, our re-interpretation of the data using broader analytical lenses led us to conclude that land grabbing occurs in at least 10 countries). Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of the key findings of the 17 country studies based on the original FAO framework.

From Table 1, we highlight the following: First, across Latin America and the Caribbean there has been a significant increase in (foreign) investments in land and

Table 1. Land investments, land grabbing, and food security in selected countries.

Presence of recent large (foreign) investments in land			Presence of foreign 'land grabbing'		Negative impact on food security of investment recipient country	
High	Medium	Low To None	Yes	No	Yes	No
Argentina	Costa Rica	Trinidad & Tobago	Argentina	Bolivia		Argentina
Bolivia	Guatemala		Brazil	Chile		Bolivia
Brazil	Panama			Colombia		Brazil
Chile				Ecuador		Chile
Colombia				Paraguay		Colombia
Ecuador				Peru		Ecuador
Paraguay				Uruguay		Paraguay
Peru				Mexico		Peru
Uruguay				Costa Rica		Uruguay
Mexico				Guatemala		Mexico
Nicaragua				Nicaragua		Costa Rica
Dominican Republic				Panama		Guatemala
Guyana				Dominican Republic		Nicaragua
				Guyana		Panama
				Trinidad & Tobago		Dominican Republic
						Guyana
						Trinidad & Tobago

Source: 17 FAO country studies (see Annex 1) plus the summary paper of Gómez (2011). The categorization (high, medium low) is a matter of degree. It is a relative concept in which 300 hectares (ha) of land in Mendoza, Argentina may be equivalent in value with 20,000 ha in Colombia. Categorization is based on individual author's estimate of the scale of land acquisitions and/or scale of capital involved.

Table 2. Land and capital concentration, by country and sector.

Country	Sectors where recent significant (land & capital) concentration has occurred
Argentina	Soya, wheat, livestock, sugarcane, tobacco, fruit, conservation
Bolivia	Soya, livestock, forestry
Brazil	Soya, sugarcane, poultry, livestock, fruit, forestry
Chile	Fruit, dairy, wine, seeds, poultry, conservation
Colombia	Oil palm, sugar beets, sugarcane, soya, rice, corn, forestry
Ecuador	Banana, sugarcane, oil palm, forestry
Paraguay	Soya, corn, wheat, livestock
Peru	Fruits, vegetables, sugarcane, oil palm
Uruguay	Soya, dairy, wheat, rice, livestock, forestry
Mexico	Corn value chain, sugarcane, fruits, flowers, coffee, barley, tequila
Costa Rica	Banana, pineapple, oil palm
Guatemala	Sugarcane, oil palm, forestry
Nicaragua	Livestock, rice, oil palm, sugarcane, citrus, tourism, forestry
Panama	Banana, coffee, rice, oil palm
Dominican Republic	Sugarcane, banana, fruits, vegetables
Guyana	Sugarcane, livestock, rice, pineapple, forestry
Trinidad & Tobago	Sugarcane, cacao, fruits

Source: 17 FAO country studies (see Annex 1), plus the summary paper (Gómez 2011). Table 2 is reformatted from Gómez (2011).

agriculture during the past decade. The level of these investments is high for most of the 17 countries, with only about three in the medium level (Costa Rica, Guatemala and Panama), while only one country is in the 'low-to-none' category (Trinidad and Tobago). Indeed despite the unevenness between and within countries, the recent vibrant investment atmosphere in land and agriculture is a region-wide phenomenon. Second, using the FAO definition of 'land grab' only two countries would qualify: Argentina and Brazil. Third, in all 17 countries studied, there is no single country case where food security was undermined by the surge of land and agricultural investments – at least not at a national scale, and not for the time being. Meanwhile, Table 2 shows that concentration of land and/or capital occurs, and it occurs in various food and non-food sectors, although there is a remarkable surge in some specific sectors, including soya, oil palm, sugarcane and corn, reforestation, and carbon offset projects, alongside land acquisitions related to mega conservation projects. Looking at a global picture in comparative glances, the dataset in Table 2 supports our argument against a too food-centered/food crisis-centred analysis of land grabs.

Overall, the definition used by FAO, i.e. large-scale land acquisitions involving foreign governments and undermining food security of a country, necessarily excluded from one's analysis many of the land grabs that occurred in the past and are occurring at present. But there are other possible explanations as to why land grabs do not happen, or cannot be detected easily in some countries in the region (in some instances even with broader lenses). For instance, Costa Rica had massive foreign investments in land pre-2000, in multiple sectors, including in foreign-funded conservation and carbon sequestration projects, tourism, beach homes, rice, sugar, cattle, flowers, as well as winter fruits and vegetables (see e.g. Edelman 1999). Costa Rica was one of the first countries to establish a market in carbon sequestration credits (long before REDD+). By 2000 it may have been 'saturated', i.e. no more land to acquire in a small country. Panama's economy is so heavily reliant on finance and canal-related services that agricultural investment there may not be as attractive as elsewhere (though it certainly exists). Trinidad and Tobago, similarly to Panama, has a mainly urban (and petroleum) economy. Unfortunately Honduras was not included in the 17 countries studied. Recent and ongoing agrarian conflicts in the Bajo Aguán (related to oil palm development, mostly Honduran capital) and Tela (tourist development, Honduran and foreign capital) have been significant.<sup>1</sup>

### **The challenge of defining land grabs**

The three dimensions in the definition used by the FAO in the study are among the most controversial aspects of the current land rush. Defining land grab narrowly like this is bound to miss significant aspects of the scope and extent of contemporary land grabbing and possible trajectories of agrarian change. This is the reason why it is important to go beyond the food-centred/food crisis-centred analysis of land grabs. But defining land grab too broadly will miss what is distinct in the particular wave of contemporary global land grabbing. This is the reason why we exclude from our land grab definition small- and medium-scale everyday

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<sup>1</sup>We gratefully acknowledge the suggestion made by Marc Edelman for the key points contained in this paragraph.

forms of *dispossession by differentiation* (see Araghi 2009), be it a Leninist or Chayanovian variant.

In order to avoid the problems cited above we offer the idea of three *key interlinked defining features of contemporary land grabbing*. First, a fundamental starting point is to clarify that land grabbing is essentially ‘control grabbing’: grabbing the power to control land and other associated resources such as water in order to derive benefit from such control of resources. It partly builds on Ribot and Peluso’s (2003) ‘theory of access’. Land grabbing in this context is often linked to a shift in the meaning or use of land and associated resources<sup>2</sup> as the new uses are largely determined by the accumulation imperatives of capital that now has the control over a key factor of production, land. ‘Extraction’ or ‘alienation’ of resources for external purposes (national or international) is often the character taken by land grabs (Wolford 2010). Control grabbing is inherently relational and political; it involves political power relations. Control grabbing manifests in a number of ways, including, ‘land grabs’ (capture of vast tracts of lands), ‘(virtual) water grabs’ (capture of water resources – see Woodhouse 2012, Kay and Franco (2012)), and ‘green grabs’ (resource grabs in the name of the environment – see Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012). This perspective addresses the problem of ‘too land-centred perspective’ in the current land grab thinking. Seen from the perspective of control grabbing, analytically and empirically land grab does not always require expulsion of peasants from their lands; it does not always result in dispossession.

Second, study of current land grabbing requires consideration of scale of land grabs. But scale of land grabs should not only be about the *scale of land acquisitions*, often within the dominant view that defines ‘large-scale land acquisitions’ as those that pass the 1000-ha benchmark (see e.g. Oxfam 2011, ILC 2011, World Bank 2010). For us, land grabbing entails large-scale transactions in two broadly distinct but interlinked dimensions: *scale of land acquisitions* and/or *scale of capital* involved. This framework necessarily considers various forms of acquiring control: purchase, lease, contract farming, forest conservation, and so on. In other words, taking the scale of capital as the unit of analysis necessarily includes land as central in the operation of capital, while a ‘too land-centred’ view (scale of land acquisitions only) on land grabs tends to miss or de-emphasize in its analysis the underlying broader logic and operation of capital. Our framework captures the diversity of biophysical requirements in capital accumulation dynamics: 300 ha of high-value vineyard, 500 ha of rare metal mining concession, 100,000 ha of land for industrial tree plantation, and 500,000 ha of grazing land for livestock may in fact have comparable scale in capital (and, for that matter, scale of labour involved) despite the huge discrepancies in physical land requirement among them.<sup>3</sup> Our framework brings capital back into our unit of

<sup>2</sup>It is, however, not always the case because land investors may simply grab control over an already existing enterprise that has a character that fit our profile of contemporary land deals.

<sup>3</sup>This also brings under a better light the owners of capital who are not directly engaged in land acquisitions, but are nevertheless involved in grabbing control and shifting land/resource use towards extractive nature, e.g. supermarket chains that favour capturing value chain (see e.g. Amanor 2012). It also throws light onto contested and grey issues such as the indirect but far-reaching implications of some distant policies, e.g. the European Union biofuels policy that has triggered speculative land investments in the oil palm sector worldwide, and the notion of ‘indirect land use change’ where crop use change in Europe (e.g. rapeseed in Germany converted to biodiesel) triggers land use change elsewhere to produce substitute

analysis, casting an interrogating gaze at what has emerged to be a flurry of ‘land measurement-oriented accounting’ of land grabs: Oxfam’s 227 million ha (Oxfam 2011), ILC’s 80 million ha (ILC 2011), World Bank’s 45 million ha (World Bank 2010); Africa as hosting 70 percent of all land grabs, and indeed in the FAO conclusion that land grabs occur in only two countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Third, and finally, the first two features are more or less the same defining features of land grabs that happened worldwide, historically. What is distinct in the current land grabs is that these occur primarily because, and within the dynamics, of capital accumulation strategies largely *in response to* the convergence of multiple crises: food, energy/fuel, climate change, financial crisis (where finance capital started to look for new and safer investment opportunities) (McMichael 2012), as well as the emerging needs for resources by newer hubs of global capital, especially BRICS and some powerful middle income countries (MICs). The key mechanisms of land grabbing arise from this: food security, energy/fuel security, climate change mitigation strategies, and demands for natural resources by new centres of capital. One offshoot of this recent development is the emergence of ‘flex crops’: 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). It has resolved one difficult challenge in agriculture: diversified product portfolio to avoid devastating price shocks, but not easy to do and achieve because of the cost it entails. With the emergence of relevant markets (or speculation of such) and the development and availability of technology (e.g. flexible mills) that enables maximization of multiple and flexible uses of these crops, diversification has been achieved – within a single crop sector. When sugarcane prices are high, sell sugarcane; when ethanol prices are high, sell ethanol. When actual market for biodiesel is not there yet, sell palm oil for cooking oil, while waiting (or speculating) for a more lucrative biodiesel market to emerge (a feature not present in *Jatropha*). The emergence of flex crops is a logical outcome of the convergence of multiple crises. Hence, in a single crop sector we find multiple contexts of land grabs: food, energy/fuel, climate change mitigation strategies. It is these broader interlinked contexts that largely differentiate current land grabs from the ones that existed before.

In short, contemporary land grabbing is the capturing of control of relatively vast tracts of land and other natural resources through a variety of mechanisms and forms that involve large-scale capital that often shifts resource use orientation into extractive character, whether for international or domestic purposes, as capital’s response to the convergence of food, energy and financial crises, climate change mitigation imperatives, and demands for resources from newer hubs of global capital. This work-in-progress definition rests on the three defining features discussed above that provide our analytical lenses, enabling us to navigate between a narrow parameter, and a perspective that is too broad that includes everyday forms of dispossession by differentiation. The framework offered here aims at de-focusing from a too food-centred/food crisis-centred narrative, a too

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crops – in this case, oil palm (Franco *et al.* 2010). But we do not include these in our definition of land grabbing despite the fact that these two examples can arguably qualify as ‘control grabbing’; it is simply relatively too ‘indirect’ for our purposes.

land-centred unit of analysis, too much weight given to transnational actors in land grabbing centred on China, South Korea and the Gulf States, on questions about physical acquisition of land through purchase and long term lease, and Africa being the main centre of gravity. Our analytical lens provides us with a better analytical handle in understanding land grab dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean, a task we now turn to in the next section.

### Key contexts and extent of land grabbing

Food production, energy/fuel production, other climate change mitigation strategies, and demands for resources from new hubs of global capital are key contextual processes of resource control grabbing in the region.

The expansion of soya, sugarcane and oil palm, all flex crops, in the context of recent changes in the global food-energy regime has led to significant expansion of commercial farms and plantations for these crops in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Guatemala. The phenomenal increase in demand for meat and other animal and dairy products (largely due to the dramatic demand from China), as well as for fruits and wines, have in turn led to the expansion of land for livestock and fruits and vineyards in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay and Nicaragua (Table 3). Table 4 shows the trend in Central America and South America in terms of the rising importance and expansion of flex crops (soya, sugarcane and oil palm) from 1961 to 2009 (see also Graziano da Silva *et al.* 2010, Hecht 2005).

The rise of flex crops has been significant (see Table 4). Dramatic increases in soya production are not only found in Brazil. In Argentina, the area planted to soya jumped from 3.77 million ha in 1980/81 to 48 million ha in 2007/08 (Murmis and

Table 3. Land grabbing by country, by sector.

Country	Flex crops and other food sectors	Non-Food
Argentina	Soya, wheat, livestock, sugarcane, fruit	Tobacco, conservation
Bolivia	Soya, livestock	Forestry
Brazil	Soya, sugarcane, poultry, livestock, fruit	Forestry
Chile	Fruit, dairy, wine, seeds, poultry	Conservation, Forestry
Colombia	Oil palm, sugar beets, sugarcane, soya, rice, corn	Forestry
Ecuador	Banana, sugarcane, oil palm	Forestry, minerals
Paraguay	Soya, corn, wheat, livestock	
Peru	Fruits, vegetables, sugarcane, oil palm	Minerals
Uruguay	Soya, dairy, wheat, rice, livestock	Forestry
Mexico	Corn value chain, sugarcane, fruits, coffee	Flowers, barley, tequila, conservation
Costa Rica	Banana, pineapple, oil palm	
Guatemala	Sugarcane, oil palm	Forestry
Nicaragua	Livestock, rice, oil palm, sugarcane, citrus	Tourism, forestry
Panama	Banana, coffee, rice, oil palm	
Dominican Republic	Sugarcane, banana, fruits, vegetables	
Guyana	Sugarcane, livestock, rice, pineapple	Forestry
Trinidad & Tobago	Sugarcane, cacao, fruits	

Source: Gómez (2011, 56).



Table 4. Flex crops in South America and Central America, Area harvested (ha), 1961–2009.

	Soya	Sugarcane	Oil Palm
South America			
1961	259,534	2,124,775	38,700
1970	1,443,590	2,485,528	57,081
1980	11,467,985	3,623,922	83,088
1990	17,725,284	5,290,929	210,906
2000	24,156,087	5,995,162	341,709
2009	42,792,479	9,878,744	448,313
Central America			
1961	9943	500,207	22,910
1970	111,844	761,258	21,986
1980	155,287	882,750	35,447
1990	309,996	875,047	57,197
2000	85,992	1,071,684	109,430
2009	83,444	1,231,025	239,204

Source: FAOSTAT (2012), constructed by the authors.

Murmis 2011, 28). In the region of Santa Cruz in Bolivia, the area planted to soya increased from 172,334 ha in 1990 to 1,003,690 ha in 2009 (Urioste 2011, 55). In this context and as mentioned earlier it is difficult, if not impossible, to make clear-cut differentiations about the actual use of these crops. The actual, potential, or speculated markets for any or all of the flexible uses of these crops are likely to have rendered investments in them safer by way of somehow achieving diversification within a single crop sector. This is a likely factor that partly explains the emerging popularity of these crops in several countries in the region. Yet, overall, other food sectors remain quite important, most especially livestock. In South America, there were 347 million cattle in 2009, up from 293 million in 1995; while in Central America there were 45.6 million in 2009, up from 41.5 million in 1995. Extrapolating these figures with a minimum of one ha per cattle, then we see the extent of land use this sector commands. They require far more land than any of the flex crops combined (see Wilkinson and Herrera 2010, and Novo *et al.* 2010 in the case of Brazil), although it is to be noted that we have witnessed in recent years significant technological advancement in the livestock and dairy sector where capital has started to move towards intensive, not extensive, production systems, as in the cases of Chile (Echenique 2011), Argentina and Brazil toward the direction of US-style feedlot cattle production (but are still mainly grass-based). In this transition to diversified livestock, cattle, in any case, are a kind of flex crop in that they can be fed with grass or any number of crops or crop and biofuel by-products.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the share of non-food land grabs has been significant (see Table 3). The two most important sectors in terms of land use are fast-growing tree plantations (e.g. eucalyptus) and conservation. The expansion of fast-growing tree plantations (for pulp and other industrial and commercial demands within and outside the region) is seen in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Guatemala, and Guyana. The Caribbean, South America and Central America are the three regions that registered the highest annual increase (in percentage terms) in tree plantations in the world, way beyond the world average (see Table 5). And while

<sup>4</sup>We thank Marc Edelman for pointing out the idea of ‘cattle’ as a kind of ‘flex crop’.

Table 5. Regional plantation area and increase in (tree) plantation area during 2000 to 2010.

	Africa	Asia	Oceania	Europe	Caribbean	Central America	North America	South America	World
Plantation Area, 2010 ( $\times 1000$ ha)	15409	115783	4101	69318	547	584	37529	13821	264084
Annual Increase ( $\times 1000$ ha)	245	2855	78	401	15	16	809	376	4925
Annual Increase (%)	1.75	2.87	2.12	0.60	3.34	3.14	2.46	3.23	2.09

Source: UNEP (forthcoming, 2012).

large-scale conservation occurs mainly in two countries, Argentina and Chile, the scale of individual cases (e.g. United Colours of Benetton deal in Argentina with close to a million ha) and aggregate total are significant. Moreover, not included in this paper and in the 17 FAO studies are the data on and analysis of emerging trend of placing forests under the carbon-offset programs, i.e. REDD+. Such policies have important impacts in terms of land control and on the livelihoods of local communities (see e.g. Osborne 2011 in the case of Mexico; see also Corbera and Schroeder 2011). Large-scale conservation, fast-growing tree plantations, policies such as REDD+ among others, are being referred to collectively as ‘green grabs’ – land grabs in the name of the environment. Increasingly, this kind of land grabbing (and its impact on existing agrarian social relations) is getting integrated in the critical land grab academic literature, with Fairhead, Leach and Scoones (2012) as a landmark collection. Finally, rising regional and international demands for minerals and fossil fuels have led to large-scale mining concessions in Peru and Ecuador (Remy and de los Rios 2011, Martinez 2011, Bebbington *et al.* 2009).

That land grabbing and the accompanying land and capital (re)concentration occur in two broad mega-sectors, namely, the flex crop complex/food sectors and the broad non-food sector contradicts the dominant narrative that land grabs occur because of the food crisis of 2007–2008 and that such land deals are oriented to food production for export to food insecure countries. There is certainly some truth to this latter storyline, especially when we see some Chinese and Gulf State governments and/or companies negotiating with various governments in different parts of the world for possible land leases or contracts for food exports. But to focus on food in isolation to other factors is problematical. In general, what we witness in Latin America and the Caribbean are the changing character and demands from the newly emerged flex crop complex, to the continuing importance of livestock, to the sharp increase of demands for natural resources by newly emerged centres of capital, and responses to policies linked to climate change mitigation strategies (conservation projects, including REDD+).

Meanwhile, the extent of recent large investments in agriculture – not necessarily involving land and other resources, such as those focusing on technology and lending – is quite wide in terms of geographic scope. Empirical data from the FAO country studies show that recent large investments in agriculture are present in 13 countries. Only Trinidad and Tobago qualifies in the category of ‘low-to-none’, and Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama in the ‘medium category’; the rest are in the category ‘high’. What Table 6 (first three columns from the left) shows is that indeed there is a renewed interest in agricultural investment across the region.

Columns 4, 5 and 6 of Table 6 show land grabbing sites – based on the aggregated empirical data from the 17 FAO country studies. It suggests that the phenomenon is wider than previously assumed: ten countries are currently experiencing a relatively wide extent of land grabbing and another three a medium extent. The ten countries where significant land grabbing is observable are: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay (i.e. all in South America, except for Guatemala which is in Central America), while the medium-level countries are Panama, Mexico and Nicaragua. Detailed empirical data for each country are not presented in this paper, but these are available in the 17 country studies, available in Spanish only.

Many of the recent land deals in the region are large-scale, such as those seen in Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Chile, transacted rather rapidly within a

Table 6. Presence of land grabbing in selected Latin American countries and the Caribbean\*.

Presence of recent large investments in land			Presence of land grabbing (domestic & foreign capital)			Country with major land investors into other countries in the region
High	Medium	Low to None	High	Medium	Low To None	
Argentina	Costa Rica	Trinidad & Tobago	Argentina	Panama	Costa Rica	Argentina
Bolivia	Guatemala		Bolivia	Mexico	Dominican Republic	Brazil
Brazil	Panama		Brazil	Nicaragua	Guyana	Chile
Chile			Chile		Trinidad & Tobago	Colombia
Colombia			Colombia			Panama
Ecuador			Ecuador			Mexico
Paraguay			Guatemala			Costa Rica
Peru			Paraguay			
Uruguay			Peru			
Mexico			Uruguay			
Nicaragua						
Dominican Republic						
Guyana						

\*Based on close reading of the 17 FAO country studies and the summary paper by Gómez (2011) – using as analytical lenses the three defining features of land grabbing discussed in the current paper.

Table 7. Bolivia – Advertisements of land for buying and selling, classified by size and year (in ha).

Year	Less than 4000 ha	4001 to 8000 ha	8001 to 12000 ha	12001 to 16000	16001 and more	Total
2004	191	49	17	9	26	292
2005	205	97	15	7	10	334
2006	164	32	7	4	2	209
2007	270	56	9	2	15	353
2008	290	83	16	1	9	399
2009	129	26	5	0	0	160
2010	149	45	10	4	4	213

Source: Urioste (2011, 62).

relatively short period of time. The case of Bolivia, concentrated in Santa Cruz, is insightful where the bulk of land *advertised* in the period of 2004–2010 for buying and selling had a size range between 4000 ha and 8000 ha (see Table 7). But in some settings, even more important than the *scale of land acquisitions* is the *scale of capital* involved. Most of the 17 studies have shown capital-intensive ventures in the usually land-extensive investments: e.g. capital-intensive sugarcane-ethanol flexible mills linked to extensive sugarcane farms in Brazil (Wilkinson *et al.* 2011), soya processing plants linked to land-extensive plantations, livestock processing infrastructures linked to land-extensive ranches, and so on. There are also highly capital-intensive ventures that do not require extensive lands, e.g. fruits and wine, cut flowers, vegetables, new emerging intensive livestock and dairy farms, and so on, where capital's control of the value chain becomes key, as in the case of Mexico (Robles 2011).

Furthermore, studies show that investors do not always look for marginal, empty lands, as the official narrative justifying land grabs claim (see e.g. World Bank 2010, Deininger 2011). Instead, they tend to go where there are existing productive lands with water supply and/or existing approximate road networks. Fruits and vineyards in Chile are concentrated in a few suitable geographic spots in the country (Echenique and Romero 2009, Kay 2002), as in Argentina (in the San Juan and Mendoza regions). Significant expansion of sugarcane plantations in São Paulo occurs partly at the expense of adjacent or nearby farms, including some land reform settlements (Wilkinson and Herrera 2010, Novo *et al.* 2010).<sup>5</sup> There is also an emergence of plantation corridors along national borders that usually have existing infrastructures: in Paraguay along the borders with Brazil and Argentina. This has in fact prompted national governments in the region to pass laws and policies prohibiting foreign investments within 50 kilometers of the borders, worried about the potential geo-political and national security implications of such foreign investments. It seems, however, that several of the non food-related land deals, i.e. fast-growing tree plantations, mining concessions, and large-scale conservation projects are carried out in places that more or less fit the profile of ‘marginal lands’ (see Oliveira 2011), although this cannot be said for REDD+ areas (see e.g. Osborne 2011 in the case of Mexico). But whether these marginal lands are automatically ‘available’ – which we contend is more of a political question than an administrative/technical one – is another issue, especially in the context where existing communities are found in these lands (see Cardenas 2012 on Colombia, Balleti 2012 on Brazil).

### **State and capital in intra-regional land grabbing**

Attention has been focused on foreign private companies and foreign governments and their role in the global land rush. The role played by the central state is often (inadvertently) ignored or de-emphasized. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the role of the central state in either promoting entry of (foreign) land investments, or promoting national companies to invest abroad has been critical. Brazil is a good example. All States are engaged in systematic policy and administrative initiatives around the notion of ‘available marginal lands’,<sup>6</sup> and its role in facilitating land investments in these spaces include some, or all, of the following: (i) invention/justification, (ii) definition, reclassification, quantification, (iii) identification, (iv) acquisition/appropriation and (v) re-allocation/disposition of these lands to transform such scarce resources (most of which are within the political-legal control of central states) into productive factors of production for renewed large-scale land-based investments. Here, technical re-mapping and land use reclassification – both technical processes that are also very political – are important instruments employed by the state. A good example of state active involvement in ways explained above is the Colombian state and Afro-Colombian territory (Cardenas 2012). In some cases, coercion and violence have accompanied the state’s effort at territorialisation, enforcement of its sovereignty and authority as well as its ardent support for private

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<sup>5</sup>This is also partly based on Borras’s fieldwork in São Paulo in 2008.

<sup>6</sup>The ‘marginal land’ discourse has interesting parallels in nineteenth-century Argentine discourses about unoccupied lands: the famous ‘guerra del desierto’ genocide against the native peoples there was not carried out in a desert; ‘desierto’ referred to empty lands, some of which were humid tropical forests. We thank Marc Edelman for pointing this out.

capital accumulation, as in the case of present Colombia (Grajales 2011) and in many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean during recent decades (Kay 2001). It is easy to surmise in the case of Latin America and the Caribbean that this practice of 'state simplification' (Scott 1998) is quite common, especially since many land deals involved opening new land frontiers. The cases of massive fast-growing tree plantations, livestock expansion and large-scale conservation involve this key role of the state, as well as in facilitating and/or brokering REDD+ contracts.

Stepping back, and looking at the bigger picture, there emerge three broadly distinct but interlinked areas of state actions that are relevant in understanding contemporary land grabs, namely: (i) Scott's 'state simplification process', (ii) the assertion of sovereignty and authority over territory, (iii) coercion through police and (para)military forces to enforce compliance, extend territorialisation, and broker for private capital accumulation. First, in order to administer and govern, states engage in a simplification process to render complex social processes legible to the state. The creation of cadastres, land records and titles are attempts at simplifying land-based social relations that are otherwise too complex for state administration (Scott 1998). This requires the state's official powers of recording land relations and (re)classifying lands (see Oliveira 2011 in the case of the Brazilian Cerrado and Amazon). This in turn brings us back to the notion of available marginal, empty lands. The trends in state discourse around land grabs are: if the land is not formally privatized, then it is state-owned; if an official census did not show significant formal settlements then these are empty lands; if the same official census did not show significant farm production activities, then these are unused lands. Currently, many of the land investments in Latin America and the Caribbean are in frontier regions, encroaching into indigenous peoples' territories, taking in grasslands such as the case of the Cerrado in Brazil (Oliveira 2011), or sparsely populated landscapes such as the Patagonia.

Second, beyond the economic benefits of land investment, land deals are also viewed as an essential building block for state-building processes where sovereignty and authority are extended to previously 'non-state spaces' (Scott 1998). Again, a good example in the region is the Afro-Colombian case (Ballve 2011) and the Amazon frontier in Brazil (Oliveira 2011, Balletti 2012). Third, coercion and violence, usually with the use of police and (para)military forces to enforce compliance to state simplification projects and the broader state-building process, have accompanied some of the land deals in the region, but most especially in Colombia (Grajales 2011) and Honduras.

This three-fold state role in land deals is carried out to a large extent on behalf of the dominant classes of capital (foreign or domestic), although it is always accompanied by the other task of the state to maintain a minimum level of political legitimacy. This makes capital accumulation and political legitimation inherently interlinked and contradictory, tension-filled, uneven and contested, across geographic spaces and over time (Fox 1993, Harvey 1998). This is the case across Latin America and the Caribbean.

The critical role of the central state in the current land rush makes the issue of land grabbing a murky one: taking what is yours is not considered 'grabbing'. It will also render efforts at global governance on land grabbing (such as the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines, or the World Bank's 'principles of responsible agriculture investments' – see Borrás and Franco 2010) quite complicated and difficult to frame, implement and enforce. The centrality of the state and domestic elites (landlords and

Table 8. (Trans-)Latin American land investors in Latin America and the Caribbean (partial).

Country of origin of regional investors	Countries in which they are active
Argentina	Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay
Brazil	Bolivia, Colombia, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile
Chile	Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru
Colombia	Bolivia, Peru
Panama	Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay
Mexico	Nicaragua, Guatemala
Costa Rica	Nicaragua, Guatemala

Source: 17 FAO studies, plus the summary paper (Gómez 2011).

capitalists) in the land grab process, and their embeddedness in a situation where there is a nationalist sentiment against land grabbing (that is often understood in terms of foreignization or denationalization of land – see Zoomers 2010) makes a class analytical lens even more relevant in terms of understanding dynamics and trajectories of agrarian change and ‘state-capital’ links (Bernstein 2010). Geopolitics and the nationalist dimension in the emerging politics of land grabbing in the region should always be examined within a complementary, if not fundamental, class analytical framework.

It is almost always the state-capital links that drive land grabs. This perspective offers a better view of the constellation of land grabbers, or classes of capital (in Bernstein’s terms), that are in alliance with the state. The hallmark of land grabbing in Latin America and the Caribbean is the strong *intra-regional character* of the phenomenon – quite developed here compared to the South Africa-centred intra-regional process in Africa observed by Hall (2012), although probably the Southeast Asian condition scanned initially by Borras and Franco (2011) may be somewhat closer to the Latin America and the Caribbean condition. This character differentiates the region from most other regions of the world, and, more generally, casts a different light on global land grabbing as we currently understand it.

In Latin America and the Caribbean today, there are seven countries that are host to land grabbing and are at the same time countries where land grabbers originate: *Land grabbed land grabbers*, to coin a crude but catchy phrase. This is in a scale not seen in any other region in the world, although, again, probably Southeast Asia may exhibit some aspects of this condition but to a comparatively limited extent (Borras and Franco 2011). The role of (Trans-)Latin American Companies (TLCs) is central to this set-up. The seven countries are: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Panama, Mexico and Costa Rica (see last column in Table 6). Table 8 offers a partial canvass of where the operations of (Trans-)Latin Companies are located.

The strong intra-regional character of land grabbing in Latin America and the Caribbean shows the key role played by regional investors. Following the discussion above, one of the most important changes in the global food-energy system and the phase of capitalist development today is the rise of powerful regional economic players seen in the emergence of the BRICS, combined with the rise in significance of several MICs in these regions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, this manifests in a situation where land investors are primarily, though not solely, (Trans-)Latin

Table 9. Area of land and plantations by the Chilean companies CELCO and MININCO.

Countries	Total area of land (ha)		Total area of forest plantations (ha)	
Area of land and plantations by the Chilean company CELCO				
Chile	1,099,846		736,000	
Argentina	257,722		129,000	
Brazil	126,616		67,000	
Uruguay	126,786		63,000	
Total	1,610,970		995,000	
Country	Total area of property (ha)	Area of forest plantations (ha)	Area for 'planter' (ha)	Area for other uses (ha)
Area of land and plantations by the Chilean company MININCO				
Chile	716,590	498,000	33,326	185,264
Argentina	94,283	65,164	2724	26,395
Brazil	213,592	94,806	31,160	87,626
Total	1,024,465	657,970	67,210	299,289

Source: Gómez (2011, 33).

American Corporations (TLCs). The latter are of two types: a company with single origin in terms of nationality (Latin American), and an alliance of two or more nationals (Trans-Latin American). Either type is likely to have some tie-up with international finance, especially in the light of laws passed in Southern America aimed at curbing the foreignization of land that seems to have driven foreign capital to forge alliances with domestic capital (via local subsidiaries and other schemes) and to explore non-purchase land acquisition schemes to circumvent such legal limitations.<sup>7</sup> This is shown in the increasing share of mixed foreign-domestic capital acquisition of land in Argentina largely through renting ('pools'). It is an illustration of an earlier point we have raised: *control grabbing*. Regional investments can be in the form of natural or juridical persons. For example, Brazilians (with varying support and encouragement from Brazilian government and companies) buy up or lease lands in Paraguay to produce soya or to engage in livestock raising, creating recurring tensions between the locals and the Brazilians; or, many Brazilians have ended up owning a significant quantity of lands in Bolivia, a trend that started much earlier, but gained momentum in recent years, and the emerging production orientation has been linked to the changed global context.

In addition, intra-regional capital is not only active in the flex crops and livestock sectors, it is also active in non-food sectors. The Chilean company CELCO's industrial tree plantation has 26 percent of its operations outside Chile (in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, for a total of 259,000 ha), while the Chilean company MININCO has 38 percent of its industrial tree plantation operations outside Chile (in Argentina and Brazil, for a total of 114,000 ha) – see Table 9.

<sup>7</sup>It is not just a question of conforming to laws limiting foreign land ownership but also of navigating bureaucracies and managing perceptions that pave the way for the mixed foreign-domestic investment or capital alliance. Often national investors can provide skilled legal counsel and bureaucratic expertise that might be harder for a purely outside group to access. Obvious foreign ownership of prime agricultural land is politically delicate (hence all those laws trying to prohibit or regulate foreignization of land) at the on-the-ground level, so it is useful to have a national face on it to deflect resentment from neighbours, and nationalist politicians. We thank Marc Edelman for pointing out this important issue.



A necessary element in intra-regional land investment in the region is the active and central role played by national capital. Despite all the talks about the significance of foreign land investors and foreignization of land (Zoomers 2010), it is constant across Latin America and the Caribbean that national and domestic elites (landlords and capitalists) remain as key investors in land and agriculture. There has been a net increase of investments in agriculture during the past decade or so, coming from foreign (intra-regional and international) and national sources. And so, in places where we witnessed a surge in foreign investments in land, such as in the ten countries where land grabbing occurs, investments by national capital has also increased. This is most concrete in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay. In many instances, the differentiation between foreigners and locals is blurred especially when it involves naturalized and/or dual citizens, as in the case of Brazilians or Japanese in Bolivia (Mackey 2011), the mixed foreigner-national category in Argentina (see Murmis and Murmis 2011), or probably some elements of ‘diaspora’ as in the cases of foreign investors from Europe and Japan located in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay. Whether and to what extent diaspora from outside the region has played an important role in ‘foreign’ land investments requires further empirical research.

The scale of direct investments from the Gulf States, China, South Korea, and India for land acquisitions is quite low, at least for the time being. There have been talks about land acquisitions for years now, in Argentina and Brazil primarily, but nothing significant has been clinched in this regard. It does not mean it will remain this way. Further reconfiguration in global capital may alter future opportunity structure in the region that may allow for a bigger role for investments from these countries. Meanwhile, conventional TNCs are currently entrenched in the region, and to a relatively significant extent engaged in land investments. They are generally North Atlantic-based. But these North Atlantic-based investors (European and American) are more common and dominant in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, and to some extent Paraguay.

The net increase of investments from regional and international (including diaspora?) as discussed above is partly captured in the recent land acquisition transactions in Paraguay. This is seen in Table 10, showing that during the past five

Table 10. Lands purchased by foreign entrepreneurs (1000 ha and over) in the regions with the most intense foreign ownership. Years 2006–2010.

Department	Purchased (in ha.) 2006–2010	Total purchased (in ha) until 2010	Nationality of main property buyers (in order of importance)
Concepción	70,000	250,000	Brazilian, French, German
San Pedro	130,000	325,000	Brazilian, German, Portuguese
Caaguazú	180,000	370,000	Brazilian, German, Japanese, Spanish
Caazapá	50,000	180,000	German, Portuguese, Brazilian
Itapúa	100,000	400,000	Brazilian, German, Japanese, Spanish
Alto Paraná	150,000	700,000	Brazilian, Argentinean, Portuguese
Amambay	80,000	450,000	Brazilian, Portuguese
Canindeyú	170,000	650,000	Brazilian, German
Alto Paraguay	900,000	2,500,000	Brazilian, Uruguayan, North American
Total	1,830,000	5,825,000	

Source: Galeano (2011, 401).

years nearly two million ha of land were transacted involving foreign ownership (for a total of nearly six million ha in this ownership category by 2010): Brazilian, Argentinean, Uruguayan, German, French, Portuguese, Spanish, American and Canadian.

More generally, it is important to examine the constellation of international investors involved in the region today within the context of an emerging polycentric food-energy regime in contrast to previous food regimes anchored by empires on either side of the North Atlantic (Friedmann and McMichael 1989, McMichael 2009). Current trends suggest multiple centres of power, and a more diverse range of key international actors within the governance structure of the food-energy complex, both sectorally and geopolitically. Sectorally, what we witness is not only the conventional food-feed TNCs involved in agricultural input-output markets (Teubal 1995). TNCs involved in the region today include unconventional actors such as oil companies, car conglomerates, biofuel companies, and so on, reflecting the changed global food-energy regime (see Wilkinson and Herrera 2010 in the case of Brazil). Geopolitically, we are witnessing not only North Atlantic-based TNCs and empires, but a far more diverse range of actors, namely originating from the BRICS and several MICs both within and outside Latin America and the Caribbean, giving rise to combined international and regional capital, whether in competition or in alliance. It is not difficult to surmise that the implications of this changed global configuration are profound and far-reaching for formal and informal rules in the governance of production, distribution and consumption within the food-feed-fuel complex and other food sectors, plus non-food sectors examined (the 'food regime' by Friedmann and McMichael 1989). But it is a question that needs deeper empirical research and further theorizing.

### **The foreignization narrative and dynamics of land property and labour relations change**

All 17 FAO studies have been framed within the perspective of and debates around 'foreignization' of land property (see also Zoomers 2010). It is relevant and important, especially because it strikes right into the heart of what is a controversial and politically sensitive dimension of global land grabbing. The political tension in Paraguay near the border with Brazil where native Paraguayans feel aggrieved of their dispossession amidst land takeover by Brazilians is one example of how potentially and actually explosive this issue is in the region. The tension-filled phenomenon of what is sometimes referred to as 'Brasiguayos' (Brazilian commercial farmers in Paraguay), however, is quite different from the less tension-filled Brazilian presence in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, as noted by Mackey (2011). The limited presence of Gulf States, Chinese and South Koreans recently controlling some pockets of land in the Cerrado in Brazil (in addition to earlier Japanese investors) is another example of the foreignization (or denationalization) creeping in the region.

But, as mentioned earlier, the extent of land acquisitions by investors from outside the region, especially those involving foreign governments, is not as significant as it is in Africa. In addition, it is also not always the case that there is clear-cut 'native-foreigner' animosity over 'foreign' ownership of land, as explained by Mackey (2011) in his study of Brazilians owning lands in Bolivia. Yet, overall, the foreignization of land remains a politically sensitive issue, driving nearly all South

American governments to formally prohibit or regulate such practice. But on its own the ‘foreignization narrative’ can be problematic as it is fraught with contradictions: recent foreignization of land is not acceptable, but foreignization of capital and investments which has been creeping in the region much earlier and which ultimately indirectly captures (land) resources is welcomed; exploitation by foreigners is not socially acceptable, but exploitation by national classes of capital is tolerable. To some extent, the narrative has inadvertently evolved into a nationalist *versus* class politics. It is easily blurred by capital’s creative maneuver to forge alliances between international and national capital, resulting in the recent rise of mixed foreign-domestic land investments in the region.

There are at least four problematic dimensions in the ‘foreignization of land’ narrative. First, there are two extreme poles in this perspective, namely, the ‘foreign government-as-land grabber’ and the ‘diaspora-as-foreign-land grabber’; both are indeed processes of foreignization. On the one hand, narrowly defining land grabs as those land investments with direct participation by foreign government will take one to account for a marginal portion of the global land rush phenomenon. On the other hand, automatically counting diaspora land purchases as land grabs may deflect our analytical focus away from the dynamics that we are interested in: the processes of agrarian restructuring due to recent changes in the global food-energy regime and the overall capitalist requirement for key resources for industrial/commercial purposes. It is certainly important to include these two poles in our analysis, but one should go beyond these. Second, a foreignization narrative tends to present a sharper focus on the transnational dimension of the key issues in land grabbing (e.g. foreigners chopping down natural forest to create industrial forest based on monocrop fast-growing trees). But what if land deals that cleared forests to open up massive soya plantations for export were carried out by mixed foreign-domestic, or by domestic, capital?

Third, a narrow current in the foreignization narrative focuses on a handful of ‘foreign’ investors – China, Gulf States, South Korea, and India – and has a less sharp understanding of the role played by the traditional North Atlantic empires, and by the regional capital. It also tends to be blind to (indirect) key policy drivers. The narrative then has difficulty capturing cases such as the European Union biofuel mandatory blending target that has sparked massive worldwide speculation for biofuel markets and thus the opening of new plantations for a variety of feedstocks (Franco *et al.* 2010) that has inspired the Colombian or Guatemalan government to aggressively promote oil palm expansion largely in anticipation of European markets for biodiesel (see, e.g. Salinas 2011 for Colombia, Carrera and Carrera 2011).

Finally, the foreignization narrative in the end is strongest in terms of objecting to ‘foreign ownership of land’ in a country that in turn partly drives recent national policy initiatives at curtailing such a phenomenon. But policy adjustments tend to happen without really addressing the logic of capital that underpins global land grabbing, as the latter continues amidst dominance of national and mixed foreign-national capital as in the cases of Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Argentina (Teubal 2009). Does land grab necessarily and always require foreignization of land property? Not really, as we have argued earlier using the notion of *control grabbing*. Conversely, does foreignization of land always imply land grabbing? – as one wonders about the small- and medium-scale individual land acquisitions by natural persons from Brazil in Paraguay or Bolivia – a process we categorize in this paper as

part of the everyday forms of dispossession by differentiation which we exclude from our definition of land grabs.<sup>8</sup>

We argue that instead of overly focusing on foreignization of property in addressing changes in land property relations it is more useful to look into the *character* and *direction* of change in social relations of property. There are two key features of the dominant narrative in land grabs. One is the foreignization of spaces, as explained above, and the other is the assumption that land grabs lead to dispossession. For us the challenge is how to analyze these two interlinked processes.

In addition, land deals (involving foreign or national capital) have indeed resulted in the expulsion of people from their lands. We see this in many places in Colombia, Paraguay, and Argentina, among others, and where this happens it is usually carried out with violence. However, data from the 17 FAO studies suggest that the phenomenon of ‘dispossession by displacement’ (in Araghi’s term) – or expulsion of people from their land – in Latin America and the Caribbean is at a scale that is relatively less in extent compared to processes of expulsion in other regions in the world – at least for the time being. There are a number of possible combinations of reasons for this, among which is that much of the expansion of new land investments occurs in extensive livestock ranches (where massive land grabbing, of a primitive accumulation type, occurred in these spaces much earlier – decades or even centuries ago). The latter then either shifts to more intensive production technology as in the case of many Chilean ventures (Echenique 2011), or moves to the frontier and engages in fresh forest clearing, or to a combination of both approaches, as in the case of Brazil (Novo *et al.* 2010).

Furthermore, land property relations change is better understood from a broader perspective, seen through a typology of directions of land-based wealth and power transfer, adapted from Borrás and Franco (2012). The main idea is that land policies are not neutral instruments: when passed and implemented, they follow four broad ideal-type paths, namely, redistribution, distribution, nonredistribution, and reconcentration. The defining principle of the redistribution type is the transfer of land-based wealth and power from the monopoly control of either private landed classes or the state, to landless and near-landless working poor (poor peasants and rural labourers). It is a ‘zero-sum’ process. The conventional notion of redistributive land reform that is usually applied only to large private lands (*latifundia*) is the most commonly understood example of redistributive land policy. However, there are a variety of other policy measures that can change the relative shares of land held by social classes and groups, including land restitution, share tenancy, land tenure reform, land stewardship, indigenous land rights recognition, and labour reform, regardless of whether the policy is applied to private or public land.

Like redistribution, the distribution type is where the landless and near-landless working poor are beneficiaries of land-based wealth and power transfers. But in this

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<sup>8</sup>What if the lands were previously in the hands of large owners? Does the transfer of ownership from one group of medium-large owners to another, with a change in land use, count as a grab? (We thank Jonathan Fox for raising this difficult point.) There are other possible related questions that are not easy to answer even with our working definition offered here. For us, there will always be a ‘grey area’ in the land grab definition, and one way to look at this is to consider a land deal character in relation to the three key components we offered in our working definition. From there, one can infer whether a land deal is closer to a land grab or to an everyday form of dispossession by differentiation involving large- to small-scale land owners.

type the original source of wealth and power is either the state or community, or a private entity fully compensated by the state. This is a 'positive sum' process; it does not confiscate resources from one social class to redistribute to another, and has been deployed in some cases precisely to avoid more radical redistributive policies (Fox 1993, 10). In other cases, this type of reform involves affirming and protecting pre-existing land access and occupancy by poor peasants whose tenure is insecure.

The non-(re)distribution type is one the defining character of which is the maintenance of a status quo, marked by land-based inequality and exclusion. The most typical land policy here is 'no land policy' which, in conditions of land-based inequality, perpetuates the existing distribution of land-based wealth and power. In other settings, a similar effect may be created when an existing land policy, even a redistributive land reform policy, is kept dormant 'from above' or becomes frozen or flounders in the course of implementation as it comes up against impediments within the state or in society or both. However, this kind of situation should not be confused with others involving active land policies that are categorically non-(re)distributive, to which we turn next.

The defining character of the (re)concentration type is that while land-based wealth and power transfers do occur, access to and control over land is further concentrated in the hands of dominant social classes and groups: landed classes, capitalists, corporate entities, and state or other dominant community groups such as village chiefs. This kind of change can occur in private or public lands. The organization of control over land resources can be through individual, corporate, state or community property rights. The transfer may or may not involve full land ownership. Different variations are possible, but the bottom line is the same: the beneficiaries of such transfers are dominant social classes and groups (or the state).

In the context of the typology above, the existing trend in Latin America and the Caribbean on the eve of the current land rush was away from (re)distributive land policies, and was towards non-redistribution (Kay 1998). When the contemporary land rush in the region started to gain momentum, the trend veering away from (re)distribution got consolidated, with non-redistribution standing tall (Borras, Kay and Lahiff 2007). During the same period, the reconcentration type has accelerated, a trend observed in nearly all 17 FAO studies. These studies point out varying forms and degrees of (re)concentration of land ownership and land-based wealth and power through resource control grabbing. Today, in many countries in the region, the Gini coefficient for land ownership remains very high. This is despite the long history of land reformism in the region (Kay 1998) that was followed by neoliberal agrarian restructuring and state agricultural policy reforms (Spoor 2002). The onslaught of land investments and land grabbing are likely to exacerbate this already problematic condition of land control. Moreover, one of the immediate effects of rising economic value of land is that it would make the already difficult (re)distributive land policies even more difficult. This is certainly the case for Brazil as pointed out by Sauer and Leite Pereira (2012). Private land owners' resistance will become even stronger. The state's calculation of its control over land resources and possible dividends is likely to block, not facilitate, pro-(re)distribution policy currents within central states. Contemporary Brazil is a good example of this.

Today, not many countries in the region talk about conventional redistributive land reform in any serious way, not even countries where some sort of land reform is still underway and being carried out with varying degrees of state support; namely, Brazil, Paraguay, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Market-led agrarian reforms

were attempted in Central America as part of the 1996 Peace Accords, but with dismal outcomes (see e.g. Gauster and Isakson 2007 for Guatemala, and de Bremond 2007 for El Salvador) as well as in Brazil (Servolo de Medeiros 2007). Auctioning state lands has been resorted to in Peru and has been heralded by mainstream economists as a good way to (re)allocate land resources for more efficient use (World Bank 2010). Formalization of titles to claimants, not necessarily along the ideological bias of conventional land reform, is favoured in some places (Eguren 2006). This is the case, for example, in Brazil, with the aspiration of *Terra Legal* to formalize some 300,000 homesteaders' land claims in the Amazon, a policy which is very much calculated in the context of rising investments in agriculture for the expansion of agribusiness into this agricultural land frontier. In the *Terra Legal* campaign the individual farm size ceiling has been increasingly adjusted over time to the current 1,500 ha which is relatively large even by Brazilian standards of family farms (Oliveira 2011).

Meanwhile, in settings where land deals did not result in the expulsion of people from their lands, these have facilitated the incorporation, adversely or otherwise, of smallholders and indigenous communities into the emerging commercial farms, plantation enclaves and value chains (Butler Flora and Bendini 2003). While peasants may retain some access to land they increasingly have to diversify their sources of income and seek a variety of off-farm employment opportunities, furthering the process of deagrarianization (Bryceson 2000, Gómez 2002, Giarracca and Levy 2004, Brumer and Piñeiro 2005, Edelman 1999, 2008). In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean evidence suggests that this is likely to be the more prevalent condition and possibly the future broad trajectory (Kay 2000, de Grammont and Martínez Valle 2009).

Available evidence in Latin America and the Caribbean based on the 17 FAO country studies does not offer any conclusive insight regarding to what extent and how peasants and workers are being incorporated in the newly emerging production complex. There are earlier studies about existing commercial farms and plantations employing workers in not very good terms like casualization of labour, such as those we see in Chile and in the sugarcane sector of Brazil. There is some evidence that suggests possible adverse incorporation into the value chain, such as the Mexican food value chain controlled by US-based supermarkets (Rubio 2003, Teubal 2005, Robles 2011). There is nothing elaborated and conclusive on this issue from the 17 FAO studies. However, it is most likely that it is much more *differentiated terms of incorporation*, that is, 'adverse', 'favourable' and 'somewhere in between' (see also Du Toit 2004) largely depending on pre-existing agrarian structures and institutions (including histories of rural class formation, state-peasant relations, and rural trade union and agrarian movement building). The study done by Fernandes *et al.* (2010) about various experiences in small-scale, community-based biofuels projects linked and not linked to large-scale industrial processors in Brazil, where some are adversely incorporated, others not, is suggestive of such diverse conditions. But overall, this is one area that needs further empirical research.

### **Concluding discussion**

Land grabbing – as resource control grabbing, explained in the beginning of the paper – has gained momentum in Latin America and the Caribbean during the past

decade. There are four key contexts within through which it has been carried out: food security initiatives, energy/fuel security ventures, other climate change mitigation strategies, and recent demands for resources from newer hubs of global capital. The hallmark of land grabbing in the region is its intra-regional character: the key investors are (Trans-)Latin American Companies that in turn necessarily involve parallel or allied accumulation strategies by foreign and national capital, almost always in alliance within the central state. Initial evidence suggests that recent land investments have consolidated the earlier trend away from (re)distributive land policies in most countries in the region, and are likely to result in widespread reconcentration of land and capital.

Initial evidence of land grabbing in this region suggests that the phenomenon has taken different forms and character as compared to processes that occur in other regions of the world, especially Africa. It puts into question some of the most dominant assumptions in the emerging literature on land grabbing, suggesting these are too food-centered/too food crisis-centered, too land-centred, too centred on new global food regime players (China, South Korea, Gulf States and India), and too centred on Africa. In this region, land grabs occur not only in the food sector, but in non-food sectors as well. Land grabs in this region have certainly been boosted by the 2007–2008 food crisis, but the process gained momentum much earlier than the 2007–2008 global food price spike period. Investors from China, South Korea, Gulf States and India are definitely seeking some grounds in this region, but at the moment they are marginal in terms of direct land investments. Intra-regional and domestic capital is the key player in land grabbing in this region. Land grabbing occurs in ten countries in the region, wider than previously assumed; when brought into the broader picture of global land grabbing, data from this region is likely to change the relative share of Africa in global land grabbing.

While the empirical data gathered and assembled in the 17 FAO studies upon which we based our analysis in this paper are relatively fresh, robust and comprehensive, these studies and our current paper are initial studies. They have, however, facilitated our identification of important knowledge frontiers. It will be urgent and important to carry out scientific research on a number of important themes, including: the actual *scale of capital* (to complement accounting of the *scale of land acquisitions*) involved; the actual condition and trajectories on likely *differentiated terms of incorporation* of peasants, indigenous peoples and rural labourers in the emerging commercial farm and plantation enclaves; and *differentiated reactions* towards land deals from affected communities and the implications of these in reshaping and transforming land investments, as well as the *agrarian implications* of green grabs.

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