



Illustration by Boy Dominguez, *Journal of Peasant Studies* issue on Green Grabbing (2012)

editorial

land grabs and land justice

Land is the basis for social life. It is a foundation not only for agricultural production, but also shapes and is shaped by societies' political, economic, and cultural dynamics: power affects land access, and land access grants power.

Given land's central role to human society, it is unsurprising that it has also been central to profit accumulation in the expansion of global capitalism. Long distance land grabs - the expropriation, commodification, and privatization of distant lands - have been a central feature of world history for 500 years.

Governments have always sought to control land, but since the enclosures of peasants' land in England and European conquests of indigenous lands starting in 1492, land grabbing has been entwined in the colonial and imperial interests of private capital alongside states. The result: continuing waves of dispossession, genocide, and enslavement of Indigenous, Black, and Brown peoples. So while recent land grabs reflect continuity, contemporary drivers and impacts must also be understood in their current context.

This issue of Nyéléni is the first part of two editions (June and September) dedicated to the theme of land. This issue examines the challenges of the current rush for land by financial and corporate actors, from the local to the global. It assesses current opportunities and maps out strategies and solutions to promote change. Land is a site of contention and injustice; it is also an area of struggle, and advancement, for food sovereignty and justice.

M. Jahi Chappell and Erik Hazard, Food First

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who we are

In the last years hundreds of organisations and movements have been engaged in struggles, activities, and various kinds of work to defend and promote the right of people to Food Sovereignty around the world. Many of these organisations were present in the *International Nyéléni Forum 2007* and feel part of a broader **Food Sovereignty Movement**, that considers the Nyéléni 2007 declaration as its political platform. **The Nyéléni Newsletter wants to be the voice of this international movement.**

Organisations involved: AFSA, Bröt für die Welt, FIAN, Focus on the Global South, Food First, Friends of the Earth International, GRAIN, Grassroots International, IPC for Food Sovereignty, La Via Campesina, Marcha Mundial de las Mujeres, More and Better Network, Oxfam Solidarity, Real World Radio, The World Forum Of Fish Harvesters & Fish Workers, TNI, VSFJusticia Alimentaria Global, WhyHunger, World Forum of Fisher People.

now is time for
food sovereignty!

box 1

Many faces of land grabs

Land grabbing is not new. But what is new is the massive scale of land grabbing that has taken place recently since the 2008 financial and food crises.

“Land grabbing takes on different forms. Women may be expelled from their land due after their husband dies, mining companies expel peasants and small farmers, as well as plantations, military bases, and eco-tourist projects. Investors are not only multinational companies or financial institutions, but may also be local and domestic.”¹

Land grabbing occurs both in the Global South and Global North, driven by local, national, and transnational elites, as well as financial investors and governments. In search for new and increasing profits, large swathes of land are either taken by force or purchased cheaply with the help of local and national governments and elites.

What is at stake is a major shift in who has “the power to decide how the land and water can be used now and in the future.”² The desire to reshape land for the use of profits is leading to a global expansion of industrial agriculture, plantations of different kinds, mining, infrastructure projects, and many other types of uses. Peasant agriculture and food sovereignty are being continuously threatened by dangers as land is lost and as peasant farmers become immersed in global-supply chains.

However, peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, and their communities continue to organize and mobilize to defend their rights to the land and defend an agriculture that puts food, people, and the environment before profits.

1 - International Conference of Peasants and Farmers: Stop land grabbing! LVC 2012 - <https://via-campesina.org/en/new-report-international-conference-of-peasants-and-farmers-stop-land-grabbing/#>

2 - The Global Land Grab: A Primer - Transnational Institute, November 2012 - <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-global-land-grab>

in the spotlight

“The new global land grabbers: Wall Street

Since the 2007-2008 financial crisis farmland has increasingly become an important financial asset for corporate investors, sparking both mass protests by farmer organizations and significant attention from international institutions. But while efforts to commodify farmland are not new, there are some marked differences in the latest chapter of the land grabbing story, posing new challenges, impacting different geographies, and offering opportunities for international and cross-sectoral solidarity.

New geographies, different tactics, same companies

Land grabbing in both the Global South and North is accelerating and spreading, often with financial links to institutional investors from the Global North. North American and European pension funds and university endowments are investing major funds in large-scale agriculture projects in regions such as the Brazilian Cerrado, where communities are displaced, land rights defenders are assassinated, and forests are burned for industrial agriculture¹. Meanwhile, family farmers in Europe and North America continue to struggle through severely low prices and cuts to social safety nets, making them vulnerable to land grabbing by many of the same institutional investors.

While the exploitation of weak institutions and corruption is central to violent land grabbing in places like the Brazilian Cerrado, land grabbing in the Global North utilizes well-functioning institutions to underwrite predatory investment tactics. Financial firms like the US retirement fund TIAA and Harvard University's endowment have spent tens of billions of dollars, much of it from pension funds of public sector workers like teachers, to acquire millions of hectares of farmland in places like Illinois and Mississippi in the United States. While TIAA has become the largest institutional owner of farmland in the world, their business goals are not focused on food production, but rather speculating on land and other essential farm inputs. While likely not explicitly illegal, companies' targeting of farmers in financial distress is a predatory tactic that leads to farmers selling their only means of livelihood: their land.

Land grabbing in North America may increase dramatically in the coming years. Decades of ongoing institutional discrimination has left many black farmers with informal property titles and insecure land tenure that makes them particularly vulnerable to land speculators and investors². Indigenous land remains under constant threat. Family farmers in general are struggling in North America, as agribusiness corporations get bigger and more powerful, and half of all farmland in the US and Canada is expected to change hands in the next 15 years as farmers retire. Without action, much of this land may end up in the hands of investors and corporations.

Pathways forward

For decades, farmer organizations and allies have advocated for key policy reforms to address land grabbing in the Global North and South, including: strengthening the land rights of marginalized communities (such as heirs property in the US along with land rights for indigenous communities and landless farmworkers); restricting corporate land ownership; and implementing policies to ensure family farmers receive fair prices to keep them on the land. Workers with pension funds, particularly in North America and Europe, can act in solidarity with farmers and peasants globally by ensuring their money is not fuelling land grabs and risky speculation. Together, these efforts will strengthen rural communities and protect workers' financial stability.

For more information on land grabbing by institutional investors visit: www.stoplandgrabs.org/en-us/

1 - Harvard and TIAA's Farmland Grab in Brazil Goes up in Smoke.” Friends of the Earth US, GRAIN, National Family Farm Coalition, Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos. Oct 18, 2019: <https://grain.org/e/6339>.

2 - Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/09/this-land-was-our-land/594742/>

box 2

Securing community land rights in Africa

In a continent where 70% of the population depends on agriculture, secure access to land and natural resources should be an unassailable right for all. But that is far from the case.

Customary governance of farmland, forests and pasturelands by traditional community leaders has been overlain with colonial and post-colonial land laws, leaving rural communities uncertain of their rights to the land they rely upon for their food, livelihoods and cultural integrity.

Recent trends of urbanisation, economic growth, and neo-liberal policies have commodified natural resources and created markets for land as a tradable asset. The financial crisis of 2007/08 and the sudden spike in food and oil prices saw a massive influx of capital into land. Between 2000-2016, African governments signed 422 large-scale land deals with investors, covering ten million hectares. Land grabs have been associated with multiple human rights abuses and social injustices, with thousands of communities forcibly evicted and left destitute. Women and youth, already disadvantaged in land access and control, often suffer the worst impacts.

In response to this crisis, global and continental guidelines were set up to establish principles for good land governance and define policies to protect customary and community land rights, notably the African Union's Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy and the UN's Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land. But these progressive policy frameworks have largely been ignored at the national and local level – where the land decisions are actually made. Thus the tenure rights of rural people across Africa, particularly women, remain weak and fraught with uncertainty.

It is essential that increased political pressure is brought to bear to accelerate the institutionalization of progressive policies to strengthen community land rights. Civil society advocacy needs to target the African Union and the regional economic communities to press their member states to institute the progressive policy guidelines. Crucially, because land rights policies only have real traction at the national and local levels, it is important for civil society to push for stronger national land rights legislation, and hold governments to account at the African Court of Justice and Human Rights.

We need to promote community land use management systems, highlighting the growing evidence that these can successfully improve livelihoods in equitable and sustainable ways whilst protecting and restoring ecosystems.

AFSA's recent work on land rights includes a continental land policy study Policy Trends and Emerging Opportunities for Strengthening Community Land Rights in Africa, capacity building workshops for civil society and faith-based organisations, a series of African land case studies, and policy advocacy at continental level to promote community land use and management systems.

We must learn from the good land governance principles of our great-grandparents who bequeathed the land to us. We must develop and adopt sustainable land use and management systems that satisfy the needs of all land users: farmers, pastoralists, hunters, fishers, wild fruit collectors, and wildlife.

For more information go to www.afafrica.org.

voice from the field 1

Agrarian Reform, a response to the current pandemic

Jaime Amorim, Member of the National Coordinating Body of the Brazilian Landless Peoples' Movement and the International Coordinating Committee of La Via Campesina

Today the demands of historical struggles like Agrarian Reform have shown themselves to be urgent, current, and necessary. A broad, deep, and people-centered Agrarian Reform that definitively resolves the problem of concentrated land ownership is needed, leaving behind the historical evil of the latifundio (plantation economy) and its entire feudalistic power structure that continues in the service of agribusiness; an Agrarian Reform that ends the models of rural development based on exploitation and export-based agricultural monocultures.

The pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of the capitalist model of development, particularly its current conservative, neoliberal model, which destroys local economies and national sovereignty, attacks democracy and the democratic rule of law, promotes wars against nations, destroys public services, rapidly spreads to consume natural and mineral resources, and advances labor laws promoting precarity, all in the name of capitalist development, that converts anything and everything into commodities in the name of economic globalization. As a result, in times of pandemic, we have seen increases in unemployment, hunger, misery, and violence. In an interview with the newspaper Brasil de Fato, João Pedro Stédile, leader of the Brazilian Landless Peoples' Movement (MST) states that "The Coronavirus pandemic is the most tragic expression of the current stage of capitalism and the civilizational crisis that we are currently experiencing."

The realization of a broad and radical Agrarian Reform can be a contemporary and modern response to the multiple current world crises: political crisis, environmental crisis, ideological crisis, social crisis, and economic crisis, which is structural in nature and is no longer capable of resolving the problems it itself has created through its exploitation and capitalist accumulation. Nor is the capitalist economic structure capable of responding to the societal challenge of safeguarding the survival of the human species—human existence and the life of the planet itself are under threat. Agrarian Reform with agroecology is necessary for food sovereignty, and in order to leave behind dependence on The Market and the large-scale food distributors.

**one does not sell
the earth upon which
the people walk**

Tashunka Witko, 1840 –1877

voice from the field 2

Land justice and pastoralists

Lorenzo Cotula and Ced Hesse, IIED (International Institute for Environment and Development)

Over the past 15 years, changing commodity prices and skewed public policies fostered a surge in commercial investments across the natural resources sectors – including agriculture, mining and petroleum. Governments of different political stripes saw the wave of investments as an economic opportunity – to promote economic development, create jobs and generate public revenues. But the deals have also prompted public concerns about the development pathway and the types of investment being pursued, and how the costs and benefits were being distributed in practice.

A vast body of research has documented land conflict and dispossession in connection with agribusiness plantation projects and extractive industry operations. More recently, deal making slowed, partly as a result of changing commodity prices. But at the local level, the pressures continue to be felt, particularly in strategic hotspots where minerals, petroleum, fertile soils, freshwater and infrastructure are concentrated. Many abandoned projects left behind a legacy of disputes, and many governments continue to identify the natural resource sectors as a foundation for national development.

Wrongly perceived to be “empty”, or “idle”, pastoral lands have long been a key target for both governments and businesses. In Uganda’s Karamoja region, for example, mining operations have been impinging on pastoral lands¹. While promised benefits in schooling, hospitals, jobs and water development fail to materialise, pastoralists are losing access to rangelands and mineral deposits and suffering water contamination. Mining also constrains herd mobility and excises key dry season resources. These developments undermine the functionality of pastoralism and its ability to support local livelihoods.

In such contexts, skewed laws often undermine the rights of pastoralists and facilitate dispossession. Although evidence shows that pastoral land use practices are resilient and sophisticated, pastoralists’ resource rights enjoy variable but often limited legal protection in practice – including in countries where legislation or even the constitution formally affirms local rights. For example, many land laws condition actual protection to proof of “productive use”, and skewed notions of productivity undermine pastoralists’ resource claims. Pastoralists’ lack of legal proof of land ownership often compounds the risk of dispossession.

We need policies that support, rather than undermine, pastoral systems, thereby advancing land justice and confronting land grabbing. While the specifics will inevitably depend on context, this often requires recognizing pastoralism as an economically and ecologically sound form of resource use; protecting pastoralists’ collective rights to land, water and grazing; and facilitating herd mobility where this provides the foundation of pastoral livelihoods.

1 - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/02/03/how-can-we-survive-here/impact-mining-human-rights-karamoja-uganda>

voice from the field 3

Rural women, grassroots feminism, and land rights

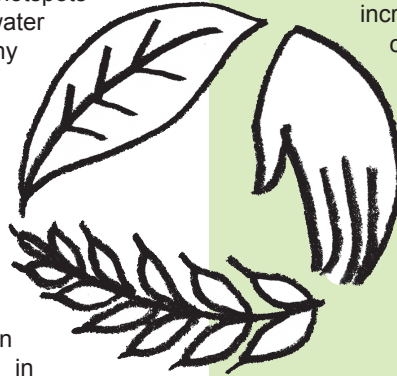
Maria Luisa Mendonça, Network for Social Justice and Human Rights, Brazil

From the perspective of women’s grassroots movements, defending basic rights to land and food is a constant struggle. Around the world, the expansion of agricultural production for export, controlled by large landowners and corporations, continually displaces rural communities. They are forced to leave their lands and means of subsistence, and become vulnerable to labour exploitation in large plantations or in urban centres, facing a condition of poverty and hunger. Monopoly over land and market speculation increases food prices, affecting low-income women disproportionately. The case of Brazil illustrates this situation, since it has one of the highest levels of land concentration in the world. Currently, there is an increasing re-concentration due to international financial speculation in rural land markets. This process increases monopoly over land and expands monocropping of commodities for export, causing environmental destruction and displacement of rural communities that produce the majority of food for internal markets.

In this context, the resistance of rural women is crucial to deal with the simultaneous economic, ecological and food crises. Women face specific challenges in times of crisis, since they usually take the main responsibility for social tasks in their households, such as providing food and healthcare. Therefore, neoliberal policies to cut governmental support for social programs and the increase in food prices mean an extra burden for working women. In addition, the displacement of rural communities forces women into the worst jobs on plantations and in urban areas.

Women’s rural movements that advocate for agrarian reform and common use of natural resources, including collective land rights, will be important. Women’s grassroots movements are promoting a new agricultural system based on local cooperatives and ecological food production. There are international human rights mechanisms but it also needs solidarity. Especially in Europe and in the United States there is a growing awareness in public opinion about the need to support small scale, local and ecological agriculture. In order to expand this movement internationally we need to increase solidarity between women’s organizations in the Global North and the Global South, as well as in urban and rural areas in support of affordable production of healthy food to benefit low-income women in rural and urban areas. We need strong alliances to transform our food system.

Abridged from *Rural Women and Grassroots Feminism*
<https://www.social.org.br/index.php/artigos/artigos-english/223-rural-women-and-grassroots-feminism.html>



Farmworkers and the land

Rosalinda Guillén, *Community to Community Development, US*

As farmworkers, the value of what we bring to a community is blatantly waved aside. We're invisible. Our contributions are invisible. That's part of the capitalist culture in this country. We are like the dregs of slavery in this country. They're holding onto that slave mentality to try to get value from the cheapest labor they can get. If they keep us landless, if we do not have the opportunity to root ourselves into the communities in the way we want, then it's easy to get more value out of us with less investment in us. It's as blunt as that. We need to look at farmworkers in this country owning land, where we can produce. That is the dynamic change we need in the food system. We all know Cesar Chavez talked about owning the means of production. I think a lot of farmworkers talk about that.

Farmworkers being a landless people in the United States leaves them in a much more vulnerable position, and in the US this is easily ignored. It doesn't even come into a discussion on a policy level or a social level. And we can go all the way back to our land being taken from us in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California. It's a legacy of that conquest, and we've accepted it. We don't talk about a way for us not to be landless. What would that look like? I went to the World Social Forum in Brazil and met with the leaders of the landless workers' movement.

We've had ongoing conversations since then, and they've come to visit us.

What we've learned from a recent visit and dialogues with the MST women leadership in São Paulo makes us confident that we are on the right path. Building a strong and bold base in the farmworker community is critical to transforming agriculture and land access in the US. We are constantly learning from the indigenous leadership of Familias Unidas por la Justicia. Continuing dialogues and strategic thinking with them will help create new ways of engaging with consumers, markets and the powerful agricultural lobby.

Other strategies like earning enough money to buy land just aren't enough. The USDA has programs so that Latino farmworkers can own land. But you end up with maybe a few Latino farmers farming the conventional way. Latino farmworkers become Latino farmers who hire Latino farmworkers and exploit them. That's wrong. That's not what we want. We want to change the whole system. So what's it going to take?

Edited and abridged from an interview with David Bacon in Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons in the United States



box 3

Climate and land grabbing

From a grassroots perspective, there has always been a strong link between the climate and environmental crises and land grabbing. For example, the causes of the climate crises and land rights violations are the same – an economic system based on endless natural resource extraction where extractive industries including industrial agriculture and plantations are leading contributors to both. At the same time the connection is also more immediate since corporate projects that cause the environmental crises such as mining and agribusiness are also responsible for the most documented killings of land and environmental Human Rights defenders.

Recently there has been a massive increase in interest for land and nature based climate mitigation and adaptation. But unfortunately many of these pose grave threats to peoples' collective rights over their land and territories with a new wave of land grabbing for conservation projects but also via the commodification and integration of nature into financial markets – what we call the financialization of nature.

A key issue is so called “negative emissions technologies” or NETs which aim to remove carbon from the atmosphere – industrial countries and corporate emitters are now relying on NETs due to their historical failure to reduce emissions as rapidly as needed in line with climate justice demands.

One prominent corporate NETs scheme is to grow and burn massive areas of trees and crops for bioenergy and then store the carbon emitted in underground bunkers. This is known as bioenergy with carbon capture and storage or BECCS and estimates suggest BECCS could require up to 3000 million hectares of land globally. Other options for NETs are so called ‘natural climate solutions’ or ‘nature based solutions’ which can include forest restoration, reforestation and afforestation. Each of these will have differing impacts on the environment, land and peoples' rights depending on who controls them and how they are implemented.



box 3

Climate and land grabbing



Corporations are already seeing nature based solutions as an opportunity to offset their emissions. Offsets allow historically big polluters like oil companies to continue emitting and pass on their responsibility to reduce emissions onto conservation projects in communities in the Global South. Offsetting does not reduce overall emissions and will therefore exacerbate climate impacts on land. It is also unjust as it retains and extends control over territories by those most responsible for climate change. Offsetting amounts to a double land grab because corporations end up controlling land use at two locations – the site they are destroying and the location they are claiming as offset.

On the other hand decentralised solutions to the environmental and land grabbing crises, based on ecological, autonomous control and governance by Indigenous people, forest peoples, small scale food producers of their own land and territories - such as agroecology for food sovereignty and community forest management - are possible and are gaining importance as solutions for environmental justice. Community forest and territorial management is the best way to preserve ecosystems such as forests, mangroves, wetlands and water bodies. Agroecology cools the climate by removing the need for fossil fuels, recycling nutrients on farms, re-localizing food systems and stopping the destruction of the environment for the production of agricultural commodities for profit. As ever it is vital that land justice and environmental justice movements work together to expose false solutions and demonstrate our own vision for a just future.

voice from the field 5

Alternatives and opportunities for land justice in Detroit

Malik Yakini, Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, US

Communities are built on the land, and we—as human beings—get most of our food, fibres and materials from it. In our present society, to be without land ownership is to be without power. If we hope to create a society with any possibility for justice, then the question of power distribution and land access is primary. To continue to amass land in the hands of the same individuals is the antithesis of freedom, and it must be struggled against. Traditional capitalistic logic would have it that selling land to the highest-bidder and waiting for “trickle-down” impacts to occur is the only way for Detroit to move forward from its current economic struggles. However, there are many alternative and better ways to build economic resiliency and equity.

It is difficult to imagine how land justice could be reached in the United States, considering the history of land theft and dispossession. How can we have true justice without returning land to the indigenous people that European settlers took it from? How could we find a solution that brings true justice to the people of African descent whose ancestors were enslaved and brought to this land against their will? Finding true “justice”—steps that make amends for these historical acts—is essentially impossible within current realities. However, there are steps that could move us forward.

In cases where the courts can prove that the United States broke treaties or acted in duplicitous ways, I believe that land should be returned by the US government to Native Americans.

I also support reparations for the African Americans who are descendants of those Africans that were enslaved on this land and did much of the labour that created the nation’s prosperity. Additionally, we must cease the confiscation of land owned by African American farmers. At the time of writing (2016), land is still being unfairly seized from local land-owners and government agents are complicit in the process. This must be investigated and stopped.

Additionally, I believe that community land trusts can be established to allow communities to exert their collective voice in what they want to see happen with land in their communities, and to play a role in decisions regarding green spaces, industrial projects, housing, or anything else that they, themselves, envision for the well-being of their communities. It is important to create policies that give the maximum number of people access to land, as opposed to policies that concentrate ownership in the hands of the few, and support for land trusts could play a role in this.

Finally, I believe that in order to create good analyses of land issues we must understand history. A real telling of the real history is important so that governments, non-profit organizations, and community organizations can have an understanding of how we’ve gotten to this point. To do this, we must continue lifting up stories of dispossession, disempowerment, resistance, and building power.

Edited and abridged from Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons in the United States.

This newsletter is funded by Brot für die Welt, FIAN, FoEI, Focus on the Global South, Food First, GRAIN, Grassroots International, La Via Campesina, Oxfam Germany, Oxfam Solidarity, VSF-Justicia Alimentaria Global, WhyHunger.



This newsletter is also funded by the European Union.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.