



Land grabbing threatens the poorest people and nations in the world, compromising food sovereignty and sustainable development. With 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty worldwide¹, the race to buy up land in impoverished nations could lead to food shortages and increased hunger. In response, global movements are organizing to restore people's sovereignty and protect traditional lands, livelihoods and cultures.

"[W]e support a particular kind of globalization that reflects justice, community and sustainability for all creation."

—Resolution on Just Globalization: Justice, Ownership and Accountability, PC(USA)

WHAT IS LAND GRABBING?

Land grabbing is the large-scale purchase or lease of land, mostly in developing countries,² by large foreign³ and domestic investors as well as governments in which the land and its interconnected resources—soil, water, metals, minerals, fossil fuels and forests⁴—are transferred from the control, use and protection of local communities, primarily without their informed consent, to external investors.⁵

As pressures mount on productive land and natural resources in their own countries, governments, transnational corporations, and foreign investors are looking to secure food, water, energy and factors of production abroad⁶ as well as boost economic activity through development and tourism projects.

The 2007–2008 global food price crisis was partially caused by speculation in international commodities markets. Ongoing speculation continues to cause volatility and drive up food prices worldwide. Land prices have followed suit, sending foreign investors scurrying to buy up land in poorer countries.

Between 2008 and the middle of 2009, the demand for large-scale farmland investments increased from just under 10 million acres to over 138 million acres, 70 percent of which was for land in Africa.⁷ The majority of these deals by foreign investors are taking place in countries facing serious hunger and poverty problems.⁸ Rather than working to improve agricultural production for local consumption, foreign investors are looking to produce crops for export.⁹

DRIVERS OF LAND GRABBING

Securing Food Abroad

Food-importing countries are particularly vulnerable to food price volatility and with the detrimental food price spikes that came during the 2007–2008 food crisis many of these countries decided to “outsource domestic food production” as a way to stabilize the prices of their food and ensure supplies.¹⁰ So, prosperous food-importing countries and their investors and corporations are now acquiring farmland abroad to produce staple food crops for their own population's food security and for economic gain.¹¹ Ironically, such land grabs often happen in countries faced with their own food shortages.

Agrofuel (Biofuel) Production

As more countries are looking to secure their energy needs in response to the dwindling supplies and rising costs of fossil fuels, the demand for agrofuels continues to increase globally

and more and more land is being grabbed from communities and deforested. Corporate land deals are converting forests and farmland from vital sources of biodiversity, food, livelihoods and local culture into vast single crop fields for the industrial production of agrofuels (ethanol and biodiesel) for export to wealthier nations. The primary agrofuel feedstocks are corn, sugarcane, and palm and soybean oils.¹²

Extractive Industries

Global consumption of minerals, metals and fossil fuels is an important driver of land and water grabbing. The average resident of the United States born in 2013 will consume more than 3 million pounds of minerals, metals and fuels in their lifetime.¹³ These extractive resources are found in everything from our gas tanks, electronics, and jewelry to our wind turbines and solar panels. Whatever forms the mining operations take—from surface and underground mining to hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and mountaintop removal—the impact on land is enormous and seldom confined to the land concession area. Local populations suffer from what is often called the “resource curse,” receiving minimal benefits from the mining operations while enduring the brunt of its consequences.

Tourism Development Projects

In attempts to attract foreign investment and boost tourism, countries are privatizing ancestral lands, displacing indigenous communities and handing over control and ownership of natural resources to foreign corporations for the establishment of private resorts, hotels, casinos, restaurants, game reserves and other tourist attractions. Communities are rarely consulted in the development process and therefore, benefits accrue to the investors and tourists, ignoring local needs. While these projects do create some employment opportunities, the wages are usually kept low and workers are often exploited. Furthermore, local communities frequently lose access to natural resources and are not granted access to new and improved infrastructures.

IMPACTS OF LAND GRABBING

Community Displacement

Indigenous peoples and smallholder farmers are often displaced from the land, sometimes violently, as a result of these land deals. This is possible because most do not possess officially recognized tenure titles, but rather live on the land under customary tenure agreements in which the state is technically the owner. Hence they are at a disadvantage when it comes to bargaining power¹⁴ and are unable to defend their land claims. Consequently they lose access to the land and its resources, their homes, their source of livelihoods, and the very foundation of their culture and way of life.

Sacrificed Sovereignty

Local community members are regularly left out of the information loops and decision-making processes of these land deals, which are usually conducted in secret. This lack of transparency ensures that the needs and goals of communities are excluded from consideration and consequently not met.

As people lose access to their lands they are no longer able to produce their own food, and consequently must rely on the market and imported food to meet their sustenance needs, subjecting them to risks of food price volatility and food insecurity. Furthermore, small farmers become disempowered as they are transformed into field laborers working for poverty wages. Impoverished local people frequently end up living like indentured servants on their own land, working for minimal pay producing food for export rather than for household consumption.

Environmental Harm

These land deals are frequently made without conducting social and environmental impact assessments. The impact on the environment is often severe. Many of these land grabs target biodiverse ecosystems with the richest soils and vegetation in order to maximize yields and profits. Forests are felled to make space for industrial agriculture production, smelters, pipelines, roads, and tourism complexes. Landscapes completely change, soil erodes, and the habitats of native species are destroyed.

These land deals also involve the grabbing of water. Modern extractive technologies are increasingly using greater amounts of water in extraction and processing—depleting, diverting and polluting water resources and the soil with widespread implications for the environment and public health. Additionally, large-scale monoculture agriculture often requires massive amounts of water for irrigation and chemical inputs, which contaminate the air, soil and water.

“The General Assembly urges agricultural policy makers and practitioners to give priority to sustainable agriculture and increased food sufficiency within each region or country, as well as to increased yields, and to fairer distribution of land, the viability of small farms, and community-based programs for sustain-able agriculture” —Hope for a Global Future:

Towards Just and Sustainable Development, as approved by the 208th General Assembly, PC(USA)

LAND GRABBING AND RESISTANCE

“They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance”

—Micah 2:2 (NSRV).

Cameroon

CASE 1: In 2000 Exxon/Mobil in partnership with PETRONAS Malaysia, Chevron, and the governments of Chad and Cameroon began construction on 621 miles of pipeline, running from the Doba fields in southern Chad to Kribi in southern Cameroon.¹⁵ The World Bank hailed the project as “an unprecedented framework to transform oil wealth into direct benefits for the poor.”¹⁶ Despite cutting straight through 248 villages in Cameroon alone, no oil revenues were designated for the development of affected villages there.¹⁷ RELUFA, the Joining Hands network in Cameroon, has accompanied communities in pressuring the company to respect compensation laws in Cameroon. As a result, more than 500 individuals, whose complaints were previously ignored, have received compensation for their lost crops, land and other damages caused by the project. RELUFA is now advocating for land management reform at the national level.

CASE 2: In 2009 the government of Cameroon leased more than 180,000 acres of rainforest and existing farmland in the Southwest Region of Cameroon for 99 years to SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon, Ltd., a subsidiary of the American company Herakles Farms, for the industrial production of palm oil for export.¹⁸ The local population was neither adequately consulted about the project nor its expected impact before it was initiated, and now their culture and livelihoods are on the line. An estimated 14,600 small farmers¹⁹ live within the boundaries of the project area and risk losing their farmland and access to the forest.²⁰ The project is situated within a “biodiversity hotspot” at the center of five protected forests.²¹ RELUFA, alongside other civil society organizations, is advocating for alternative development strategies to protect natural resources and strengthen the capacity of local small-scale farmers to ensure food security in the land concession area that is currently under the threat of deforestation by the large-scale palm oil plantation project. In 2013 the government of Cameroon scaled back the land concession to just less than 50,000 acres under pressure from local, national and international voices.

Sri Lanka

The Kalpitiya peninsula and the 14 Kalpitiya islands along the coast of Sri Lanka are home to about 65,000 people,²² roughly

13,000 of whom earn their livelihoods in the fisheries industry.²³ Since 2003 around 1,000 acres of land, about one-fourth of the Kalpitiya islands’ total land area, have been seized from approximately 2,500 families.²⁴ Immediately following the 2004 tsunami and subsequent 2009 post-war reconstruction phase, hotel and resort businesses began buying up damaged and evacuated coastal areas from the government at low prices nationwide.²⁵ At least 16 resorts and hotels with access roads have been proposed for construction in the area.²⁶ The government of Sri Lanka has allegedly sponsored illegal land seizures by removing families from the government registry so that they are unable to defend their land claims.²⁷ The affected populations are mobilizing with the support of Praja Abhilasha, the Joining Hands network in Sri Lanka, and the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO) for improved transparency, and to protect their homes, livelihoods and the fragile coastal ecosystems from harmful tourism development projects.²⁸

South America’s Gran Chaco Region

Indigenous communities within the Gran Chaco (which runs through Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina) have been evicted from their traditional lands, where they have been preserving the delicate ecosystem of the forest for centuries, by medium and large local and foreign companies, primarily, for the industrial production of soy for export. Squeezed onto smaller and smaller plots, communities rely on minimal subsistence farming of seasonal crops for their survival and in many cases have little choice but to provide cheap labor for the agro-export enterprises. PHP in partnership with Church World Service has been working to assist the Chaco people regain legal titles to their ancestral territories with the goal of preserving the land, ensuring food sovereignty, and maintaining indigenous identity. In the past eight years 1,788 sq. miles of land have been recovered.

Take Action on Land Grabbing

- Contact the Joining Hands Initiative of PHP to participate in global campaigns against land grabbing. Contact Valery Nodem at valery.nodem@pcusa.org.
- Send letters to the governments of countries where land grabbing is taking place and to the corporations initiating/investing in land grabbing to demand that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples be respected.
- Divest your savings or retirement funds from investments in land grabbing.
- Write to the World Bank and ask that they freeze their investments in land grabbing.

Endnotes

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