
Earth grabbing: The ongoing concentration and privatisation of land, water, air

There is a great deal of talk about the crises facing the planet: the climate crisis, energy crisis, food crisis, financial crisis, loss of biodiversity, and so on. Without a doubt, these are dramatic situations whose worst repercussions will be suffered by the most vulnerable and dispossessed sectors of the population.

But at this point we know very well that these crises are not the result of natural or random phenomena. They are manifestations of the current capitalist system and its dynamic of permanent expansion. They are also functional for capitalism, because they allow for its renovation and recycling. When bubbles burst they create new business opportunities. Investments grow as old markets are expanded and new ones are created.

The financial market crash of 2008 resulted in heavy losses for speculators, whose need to recover from those losses led them to create new markets and new products. The entire planet has become the setting of a new escalation in financial capital investment.

The “green economy” with its proposal of new markets for investments in new products demands ever more land, more water, more air, more minerals.

The advance on land

While land grabbing and concentration of land ownership are not new phenomena, the financial crisis and previously, in 2007, the abrupt rise in food prices spurred by commodities speculation have resulted in a new escalation.

In a short period of time, millions of hectares of land have changed hands, with an accompanying change in land use. Control of the land passed from rural communities to foreign investors – and sometimes local investors – primarily for industrial and commercial food production, or for logging, the carbon trade or mining, among other projects.

The international organization GRAIN – which has been monitoring the process and maintains the website <http://farmlandgrab.org> as an information resource – warns that “contracts are getting signed, bulldozers are hitting the ground, land is being aggressively fenced off and local people are getting kicked off their territories with devastating consequences.”(1)

Meanwhile, according to a recent report from GAIA (2), there has been a marked acceleration of investments in extractive industries in the last three years, and not only in metals, minerals, oil and gas, but also in their associated financial derivatives, in other words, in the associated financial market. In the last ten years, iron ore production has increased by 180%, cobalt by 165%, lithium by 125%, and coal by 44%.

Vast areas of land are also being purchased for the establishment of game reserves or for tourism,

and even by conservationists to keep them pristine.

Whatever the purpose, what all land grabs have in common is the requirement that the land be cleared of people – other than workers brought in by the new owners.(3) But there is practically nowhere on the planet that is unoccupied, and especially not fertile lands. This means that land grabs lead to the expulsion of families, communities, entire peoples, destroying their social networks and even their very identity, and often through violent means. And these lands are lost to future generations as well.

Land grabbing has reached such outrageous proportions that even the international agencies that actively promote or tacitly approve of agribusiness have taken notice: a 2010 report from the World Bank stated that 47 million hectares of farmland were leased or sold off worldwide in 2009 alone.(4) Even FAO, while treating the issue with kid gloves, admits that there have recently been land acquisition deals “of unprecedented scale.”(5)

For its part, Oxfam reports that since 2001, as many as 227 million hectares of land have been sold or leased in countries of the South, the bulk of it in the last two years, and mostly to international investors.(6)

Various sources report that Africa is where most land grabs have occurred, undoubtedly because investors have found prime conditions there: large extensions of land, low prices, and weak and permissive states to facilitate these deals.

But Africa is not alone. The advance on land also extends to Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, and not only through buying and leasing. In India, the National Mission for a Green India or Green India Mission (GIM), part of the government's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), plans to plant five million hectares of land with trees for carbon sequestration and storage. The aim is to link up the GIM with carbon offset programmes like REDD+ or the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), which convert the carbon recycling capacity of trees into a commodity. These plans would imply moving into lands currently under other uses, such as “marginal” lands. However, lands which the GIM classifies as marginal farming lands or wastelands are already devoted to multiple uses, such as for grazing or as part of shifting cultivation cycles. If these lands are covered with trees, the communities that depend on them will be deprived of their means of livelihood, a situation denounced by the Indian organization Kalpavriksh (see WRM Bulletin 172).

Taking over the air

In the case of the carbon trade system – which opens the doors to the privatization and commodification of the world's last remaining forests – the grabbing even extends to the air, considered an “environmental service”, a commodity that can be traded for pollution. The carbon offsets market has introduced the “financialization” of nature, in which the main sources of investment are capital markets (investment funds, banks, energy traders and other speculators).(7) Those who pollute but have the money to buy carbon bonds are in some way taking over the air, because these emission permits legitimize their personal and irresponsible use of the common resource of the atmosphere. If the current trend continues, we might even see the creation of formal air market, with unimagined scope.

Privatized water

Land grabbing is also closely linked to water grabbing, which has also undergone an upsurge since

the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008, according to the Transnational Institute (TNI).(8) Similar to land grabbing, water grabbing involves powerful actors taking control of valuable water resources for the benefit of their own profit-driven business interests, depriving local communities whose livelihoods depend on the shared use of these resources and related ecosystems.

Moreover, this is happening in the context of a veritable global water crisis: according to figures from TNI, 700 million people in 43 countries live below the “water stress” threshold of 1,700 cubic metres per person per year.

Water goes from being a common and public resource to just another raw material, subject to private ownership. Water grabbing takes a wide range of different forms, from the sea grabbing that deprives traditional fisherfolk of their livelihoods to make way for offshore oil drilling, industrial fishing or shrimp farms, to the massive use and pollution of water in mining operations – taken to new heights with the new technology of hydraulic fracturing or “fracking”(9) – to large-scale industrial agriculture through monoculture plantations of both food and non-food crops, which require enormous amounts of water, up to ten times more than biodiverse farming systems.

Among monocultures there has been a particular upsurge in the establishment of plantations of trees for biomass energy production, which also offer the flexibility to be diverted towards other markets – timber, pulp or carbon credits – depending on which offers the most favourable prices. There has also been an expansion of biomass plantations, for example, in the arid Northeast region of Brazil, to supply wood-fired power plants – a practice that is being heavily promoted in Europe as supposedly “renewable” energy. Numerous testimonies bear witness to the dramatic situations that these plantations create for local communities and ecosystems, due to the land they occupy as well as their monopolization of water resources. The situation is made worse when people lack secure and legally recognized land tenure rights, and even more so for women, who tend to suffer particular discrimination when it comes to the recognition of their rights to land.

There is no such thing as responsible grabbing

The effects of this new globalized colonialism are clearly visible, although divisions emerge when it comes to identifying solutions. In the case of land grabbing, water grabbing and air grabbing alike, the underlying context is the extractivist, industrial, large-scale, speculative and consumerist economic model of capitalism in its most nakedly neoliberal form.

Any solutions that are put forward within these parameters cannot be solutions at all. Could there really be any such thing as “responsible” dispossession, “responsible” pollution, the “responsible” loss of the identity and dignity of a people?

Nevertheless, there are proposals along these lines which – just like the “green labels” of certification schemes, sustainable production roundtables and “transparency” initiatives – serve to legitimize and lend a gloss of “responsibility” to a situation that is intrinsically “irresponsible”. Such is the case of the seven “Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) that Respects Rights, Livelihoods and Resources”, proposed by the World Bank and, since 2010, jointly promoted with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The principles, which are voluntary, can be held up by investors making large-scale agricultural land acquisitions as proof of their willingness to implement “responsible” projects.

But the principles basically accept large-scale land transactions, placing all of the “stakeholders” on

an equal footing, as if it were an even playing field. They speak of possible “win-win” scenarios, ignoring political questions and structural inequalities.

And they do not refer at all to agrarian reform, a measure that has long been demanded by social movements in the context of the human right to food. As stressed by the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform, Land Research Action Network, FIAN International, Focus on the Global South, La Via Campesina and Social Network for Justice and Human Rights, “deciding who has rights over which land resources is essentially a political matter that involves conflicting interests and power relations; these are not merely technical or administrative problems. ... History shows that almost always, when ‘one-size-fits-all’ technical approaches to land rights are used, the interests of capital, favouring the rich (and the state) prevail, leading to further marginalisation of peasant and working classes through dislocation, displacement or dispossession.”(10)

While the RAI principles do address the concept of “food security”, this is a very limited concept, which does not call into questions the modes of production, distribution and consumption which have led to the food crisis. Food production could be made available through industrial agriculture, but at the cost of the inevitable consequence of dismantling rural communities and the depletion and pollution of the soil and water, as well as the air. That is why La Via Campesina and other organizations, through the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform, refer instead to the right to food sovereignty. And land grabbing is totally incompatible with food sovereignty, since its sole motive is the maximization of profits: investors are promised profit rates of 20%, while food production generates profits of between 3% and 5%.

The discussion, therefore, should not focus on mitigating the negative impacts of large-scale investment projects – which is generally nothing more than a public relations strategy – but rather on identifying the types of investment needed to eradicate hunger and support the rights of peasant farmers and rural communities to their lands.

In 2011, La Via Campesina and the West African Network of Peasants and Agricultural Producers (ROPPA) joined with other organizations to launch the “Dakar Appeal Against the Land Grab”, which has since been endorsed by numerous social organizations. Their goal is for the appeal to serve as “a vehicle to forge broad alliances at the local, national and international levels and pave the way for large mobilizations to support all the communities and peoples' organizations that are defending themselves against land grabbing on the ground. The appeal calls for an immediate stop to land grabbing and the restitution of the lands that have been taken away from local communities. Moreover, it makes several demands of national governments and international organizations.” (11)

There is no such thing as responsible land, water or air grabbing. That is the dividing line.

1- “It's time to outlaw land grabbing, not to make it ‘responsible!’”, Vía Campesina, GRAIN and others, April

2011, <http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4227-it-s-time-to-outlaw-land-grabbing-not-to-make-it-responsible?locale=en>

2- “Opening Pandora's Box: The New Wave of Land Grabbing by the Extractive Industries and the Devastating Impact on Earth”, The Gaia Foundation,

2012, <http://www.gaiafoundation.org/sites/default/files/executivesummary.pdf>

3- “The Land Grabbers”, Fred Pearce, cited by Gaia Vince in “Hungry for Land”, Conservation Magazine, March 2012, <http://www.conservationmagazine.org/2012/03/hungry-for-land/>

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- 4- Rising Global Interest in Farmland, World Bank, 2010, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTARD/Resources/ESW_Sept7_final_final.pdf
- 5- "Trends and drivers", Land Grab or Development Opportunity? Agricultural investment and international land deals in Africa, FAO, IFAD and IIED, 2009, <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/011/ak241e/ak241e02.pdf>
- 6- "Land and Power: The growing scandal surrounding the new wave of investments in land", Oxfam, September 2011, <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp151-land-power-rights-acquisitions-220911-summ-en.pdf>
- 7- Mercados de carbono. La neoliberalización del clima, Larry Lohmann, 2012, Ediciones Abya-Yala, http://www.wrm.org.uy/temas/REDD/mercados_de_carbono.pdf
- 8- "The Global Water Grab: A Primer", Jennifer Franco and Sylvia Kay, Transnational Institute, March 2012, <http://www.tni.org/primer/global-water-grab-primer>
- 9- Fracking involves the high-pressure injection of a toxic mix of chemicals and water into underground rock deposits to release the natural gas and oil trapped within. It is a technology that pollutes the soil and groundwater.
- 10- "Why We Oppose the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI)", Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform, Land Research Action Network, FIAN International, Focus on the Global South, La Via Campesina and Social Network for Justice and Human Rights, October 2010, http://www.landaction.org/IMG/pdf/FINAL_Engl_Why_we_oppose_RAI.pdf
- 11- Dakar Appeal Against the Land Grab, <http://www.petitiononline.com/dakar/petition.html>