
Territoriality vs. Land grabbing

According to the dictionary, to “grab” is to seize suddenly or roughly, sometimes forcibly or unscrupulously. It carries a connotation of greed, of grasping what one wants with no concern for the welfare of others.

When it comes to land grabbing, specifically, this is something that has occurred throughout history, carried out by powerful forces, from the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the politically powerful aristocrats of ancient Greece, the patrician families of the Roman Empire, the feudal lords of Europe, China, Japan and India, the institution of the Catholic Church, and the colonizers of the Americas and Africa, right through to today’s agribusiness transnationals, to name just a few. In all cases, at some point, the process of land grabbing has been violent, and has trampled over the sense of identity and community attached by communities and peoples to their lands and territories, defined as “sacred” by indigenous peoples.

We have addressed the subject of land grabbing numerous times in previous issues of the WRM bulletin, and in issue 177 we talked not only about the grabbing of land but also of the water and air, which we called “earth grabbing”. We noted that in the current process of land grabbing, the main actors are from the financial world. The entire planet is increasingly being turned into a giant market open to investment and speculation. Everything that nature offers, whether tangible or intangible, is turned into commercial assets; investments move rapidly from one region to another to undertake projects like large-scale industrial plantations (of trees, legumes, grains) for export, mining, tourism, dam construction, etc. These activities are generally carried out in countries of the South, at ever greater speed and with ever larger dimensions.

As defined by GRAIN, land grabbing refers to the acquisition of large tracts of land either through lease, concession or outright purchase (1). In the case of farmland, this process has served to deepen the “financialization” of agriculture, as powerful financial and economic actors are increasing their control over natural resources, displacing and destroying peasant farmers and other rural communities. When it comes to farmland acquired for the production of basic foods for export, GRAIN notes that according to the World Bank, 56 million hectares of land had been leased or sold in 2008-2009, while the Land Matrix project placed the figure at 227 million hectares as of 2012.

In this global land grab, an ever greater role is being played by financial funds, including pension funds, private capital funds and hedge funds. According to GRAIN, of the 100 billion dollars from pension funds estimated to be invested in commodities, between five and 15 billion has gone into farmland acquisitions, and this figure is expected to double by 2015 (2). In the meantime, numerous governments are heavily supporting and promoting these acquisitions, while multilateral financial institutions are also playing a key role in facilitating land grabs (see the article on the World Bank and land grabbing in this issue of the bulletin).

In the face of this capitalist onslaught that excludes the most dispossessed, the local communities, the most vulnerable sectors, other concepts of territory are being upheld, ones that consider other values beyond those of the market and that encompass a deeper, more diverse and colourful

dimension of human and social life. Some refer to these conceptual approaches as “territoriality”. Jean Robert, in his article “Guerra a la subsistencia. Crisis económica y territorialidad” (The War on Subsistence: Economic crisis and territoriality) (3), confers it with a meaning that goes beyond classic land claims to encompass “a territory with its water, its forests or its scrubland, its horizons, its perception of ‘ours’ and ‘other’, in order words, its limits, but also with the imprints left by its dead, its traditions, its sense of what the good life means, with its celebrations, its way of speaking, its language or turns of speech, even its ways of walking. Its cosmovision.”

The advance of land grabbing imposes its own rules, denying the rights of those who can tell the stories of their territories as evidence of their genuine tenure. “If this is your land, then where are your stories?” a member of the Gitxsan indigenous peoples of British Columbia, Canada asked a government representative during a hard-fought legal battle for the recognition of his peoples’ territories. Not only do the land grabbers have no stories to tell about these lands; they obliterate those stories. This is business, pure and simple, in which the powerful always win and the most vulnerable always lose.

As we noted earlier, grabbing takes many different forms. The occupation of vast tracts of land for agribusiness has been the most visible phenomenon in recent years, but enormous areas continue to be destroyed for oil exploration and drilling, or the excavation of giant open-pit mines; ecosystems are flooded for the construction of massive hydroelectric dams and power plants; coastal mangrove forests are destroyed to create shrimp farms; “green deserts” of monoculture tree plantations continue to expand; and so on and so forth.

There is also another more subtle and perverse form of land grabbing that comes disguised as “conservation”: REDD+ projects also represent the grabbing of territories in that they strip local communities of their habitat, their livelihoods, and ultimately, their identity.

Peoples' understanding and use of territory is key to resisting land grab in the search for collectivity and solidarity.

This article is based on the following sources:

(1) “El acaparamiento de la tierra agraria: otra amenaza para la soberanía alimentaria”,

GRAIN, <http://revistasoberaniaalimentaria.wordpress.com/2011/01/29/el-acaparamiento-de-la-tierra-agraria-otra-amenaza-para-la-soberania-alimentaria/>

(2) Pension funds: Key players in the global farmland grab, GRAIN, June 2011, <http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4287-pension-funds-key-players-in-the-global-farmland-grab>

(3) Guerra a la subsistencia. Crisis económica y territorialidad, Jean Robert, Fobomade, <http://www.fobomade.org.bo/art-2010>