



## Global land deals:

# What has been done, what has changed, and what's next?

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## **Global land deals: What has been done, what has changed, and what's next?**

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### **Abstract**

*In 2010, the Land Deals Politics Initiative formed to study the rising number of large-scale land deals taking place around the world. As the so-called 'global land grab' took shape, we organised small grant competitions to generate more empirical research into the phenomenon, and we organised conferences to debate the parameters and dynamics from the local level to the global. In this article, we take stock of what has been written about land grabbing as well as the way in which the context has changed since 2010. We highlight the ongoing need for research, as well as the changing nature of financial capital, the institutional "reforms" that resulted from calls for change, new technologies that have emerged to measure and distribute land access, the role of climate change in underpinning powerful new green grabs, and the changing geopolitical context that challenges resistance even as people struggle to retain their access to land. Finally, in the lead up to the 2024 Conference on Global Land Grabbing in Bogotá, Colombia, we highlight several challenges for the next decade of research on global land grabbing.*

### **Keywords**

land grabbing, land deals, large-scale land acquisition, large-scale land transactions, green grabbing, land enclosure, dispossession

### **Introduction**

In the early 2000s, as food and fuel prices skyrocketed, a massive land rush unfolded. Public and private investors, from nation-states to hedge funds and individuals, acquired vast areas for the production of food, cash crops and biofuels. Such enclosure—and the concomitant dispossession of local residents and re-direction of local ecologies—was not itself new. A “scramble for land” was core to historical and ongoing processes of colonisation, imperialism, state formation, and development in both the global South and global North (White et al. 2012, 623-625). What happened in the 2000s was a rapid and notable increase in the direct acquisition of land, as world food and fuel prices surged. This was compounded from 2008 when global markets in housing, insurance, and automobiles collapsed under their own weight (the so-called Global Financial Crisis), and farmland emerged as a relatively safe and high-earning asset class, particularly given the likelihood of ongoing food and fuel shortages (Clapp and Isakson 2018, Fairbairn 2014, Ouma 2016). The rise in land deals was first identified as a global trend in 2009 by the activist group, GRAIN. Relying on reporting in mainstream and activist media, GRAIN (2008) documented the growing number of media reports on individual land transactions and—often—ensuing protests. GRAIN coined the term, the ‘Global Land Grab.’ Although it was hard to know exactly how much land was being acquired, where, and under

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<sup>2</sup> The order of authors is in reverse alphabetical order. All authors provided equivalent contributions to this article.

what conditions, it was clear that a massive change in land ownership, access, and production was underway (see also Cotula 2009, von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009, Zoomers 2010).

In 2010, a small group of us formed what we called the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI).<sup>3</sup> Some of us had begun to research land grabbing through an exploration of biofuel investments in 2009 (Borras, McMichael, and Scoones 2010), and we hoped the LDPI would build a broad network of researchers and activists concerned with the implications of land grabbing for rural areas and people. We were reacting against a report put out by two World Bank economists (Deininger and Byerlee 2011) that seemed to support the reallocation of capital such that ‘idle’ or ‘under-performing’ land could be appropriated to increase the productivity of agriculture—enabling exactly the transition to industrial development long seen as inevitable and good by orthodox development thinkers. We joined many of our colleagues in worrying about the extractive and exploitative dynamics of what we characterised as ‘the new enclosures’ (White et al. 2012). The LDPI built on and contributed to emerging debates in the early 2010s around ‘land control’ (Peluso and Lund 2011), ‘land transfers’ (Rahmato 2011), ‘territoriality’ (Byrne, Nightingale and Korf 2016), and ‘extractive frontiers’ (Moore 2017). Through a knowledge generation process, we and our collaborators interrogated land grabs, including engaging in a debate over the nature of the ‘rush’ (de Schutter 2011, Edelman, Oya, and Borras Jr. 2013, Hall 2011, Li 2011, Margulis, McKeon, and Borras Jr. 2013, Moyo, Yeros, and Jha 2012), researching related phenomena of ‘green grabs’ (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012) and water grabbing (Mehta, Veldwisch, and Franco 2012, Vélez 2012), and critically examining the role of the state (Lavers 2016, Levien 2018, Wolford et al. 2013) and instances of both resistance and conformity (Hall et al. 2015a). We engaged with pressing questions of methodology—from how to define land grabbing to how to measure it in different places and times (Scoones et al. 2013). Through a series of conferences (held in Halifax, Brighton, Ithaca, The Hague, Chiang Mai, Bogotá, and Brasília), energised and informed in part by a growing network of recipients of LDPI small grants, the LDPI provided an informed, grounded perspective, backed by a veritable flood of articles, special issues, books and theses, published in many outlets but perhaps most notably in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*. We also supported regionally-focused conferences and special issues on South-east Asia (Park and White 2017; Schoenberger, Hall and Vandergeest 2017), and Latin America (Rodríguez Muñoz, Camacho Segura, and Morales 2017).

Several other networks were working on land grabs at the same time as LDPI. International research hubs emerged, including the Land Academy (or LANDac) at Utrecht University, the International Land Coalition’s (ILC) collaborative work with the University of Bern, and the French government’s Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD), in addition to prominent national and regional centres both inside and outside academia, like the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in London, the Institute of Agrarian Studies in Harare, and the Foundation for Social Studies in Addis Ababa. Intergovernmental institutions including the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) produced ground-breaking studies, including the FAO’s study of land grabbing in 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2010-2011 (Gómez 2011). Land grab research also

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-networks/land-deal-politics-initiative>. The LDPI was a creation of and at the same time an extension of the Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS) formed in 2007 partly as an off-shoot of the 2006 International Conference on Land at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague. See: <https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-networks/initiatives-critical-agrarian-studies>.

started to overlap with the rapidly-expanding Environmental Justice research hub at ICTA (l'Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambiental, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (UAB) (Temper 2018), the international nature conservation research community, especially through the Political Ecology Network (POLLEN) and the BRICS Initiative in Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS). These networks, and networks of networks, generated massive intellectual and political energy for land grab research and political debates.

More than a decade after GRAIN first called attention to the 'Global Land Grab', media interest has plummeted. We know that land grabs continue but we (still) lack good data on the number, quality, and effects. It seems clear that some of the land acquired during this period is under production, while other investments stalled or failed outright (Chung 2019, Gill 2016) or proceeded with small-scale or incremental investments (what Jun Borrás calls 'a thousand pin pricks'). The number of both media and academic articles with 'land grabbing' in the title has decreased but land grabbing has not disappeared, and the consequences of the earlier phases are still reverberating throughout the world.

As we gear up for another conference on global land grabbing—more than a decade after the first LDPI conference at the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex in Brighton, UK, in 2011—we feel a continued sense of urgency. We see four important questions before us:

- What happened to the thousands of land grabs documented by researchers, non-governmental organisations, activist groups, news media and aid agencies?
- What new configurations of land, labour and capital have emerged since the early 2000s and the rise of the 'global land grab'?
- What new dynamics of land investment are occurring—and are these continuities or changes from what we learned before?
- How has the work produced between 2010 and today shaped academic and activist language and theory around agrarian relations, capitalism, state formation, and local to global resistance?

This framing paper offers a short review of the literature with a focus on what has changed since the early 2010s, as well as offering some preliminary questions and ideas for the way forward. We argue that a sophisticated body of literature on global land grabbing has developed over the past 15 years, with increased (and much-needed) attention to history, scale, and methods. We flag five important dynamics of the last decade. First, financial capital is even more concentrated than before, and land is more attractive as an asset given the outbreak of war, pandemic, and hunger. Second, new technologies such as drones, blockchain, and social media enable increasingly 'efficient' extraction, whether that involves direct land acquisition or indirect means of dispossession. Third, the furore over the 'Global Land Grab' led to a number of institutional changes, primarily new voluntary guidelines and campaigns to register or title land whether through deeds or community mapping. Fourth, concerns over climate change make unusual allies and compromises that enable ongoing green grabbing via carbon offsets, biofuels and transition mineral extraction. Fifth, the authoritarian political context around the world has been a challenge for organising resistance at the local level, making global alliances ever more important. In our conclusion, we outline several challenges for scholars of land grabbing.

## **Global land grabs over the last decade**

### *A sophisticated literature*

There are now hundreds of articles, reports, blog posts and books on land deals. A handful of excellent recent collections attempt to revisit, synthesise and aggregate empirical and theoretical knowledge on global land grabs, including Oliveira et al. (2020), Yang and He (2021), Lind, Okenwa, and Scoones (2020), Neef et al. (2023), and Liao and Agrawal (2024). These are complemented by country-focused collections (Cabral, Sauer, and Shankland 2023) and thematic explorations, such as those around extractivism (Chagnon et al. 2022, McKay, Alonso-Fradejas, and Ezquerro-Cañete 2021, Ye et al. 2020). It is evident that land grabbing is truly global, not just located in the financially constrained countries in the Global South. Land grabs also occur in countries that are home to companies identified with land grabs, such as India and China (Andreas et al. 2020), Western Europe (van der Ploeg, Franco, and Borrás Jr. 2015), Eastern Europe (Visser and Spoor 2011, Australia (Sippel, Larder, and Lawrence 2017) and North America (Desmarais et al. 2017).

Many of the spectacular land deals highlighted back in the early 2010s have failed, whether because they were unrealistic or poorly planned or because they were always speculative in nature (Kaag and Zoomers 2014, Nooteboom and Bakker 2014). The old storyline of a huge ‘grab’ by foreign companies, backed by states, taking large areas of land for agriculture especially in Africa has given way to a more complex picture. Such is the story of Prosavana in Mozambique, the controversial and ultimately unsuccessful tripartite bid to create a new ‘Cerrado’ akin to Brazil’s farming frontier, with Brazilian technical expertise and Japanese financing on a large swathe of Mozambique’s land (Clements and Fernandes 2013, Monjane and Bruna 2020, Shankland and Gonçalves 2016, Wolford 2021a). As Prosavana fell apart, ongoing scholarship has analysed what remains—a body of scientific research that privileges large-scale commodity crops, government officials and investors who are never held accountable, and countless on-the-ground initiatives to alter land access to favour export production in the future (Cabral and Leite 2015, Wolford 2021a). But there are many other motives for land grabbing besides agricultural production, ranging from conservation to mining, climate policies to portfolio diversification. With important exceptions, an agro-centric bias in the literature has been one of the conceptual problems in ‘seeing’ other motives for land grabbing (Edelman 2024).

Among the many trajectories of land deals over the last ten years, we can distinguish three broad types: those corporate land deals that are operational; those that are non-operational (the so-called ‘failed land deals’ that either never materialised or started and then collapsed); and incremental ‘pin prick’ land deals or investments. Studies show how all of these types have affected pre-existing social relations. The former have been the focus of most studies. The least explored and understood impacts are those of the so-called ‘failed land deals’ (Borrás et al. 2022, Chung 2019, Cochrane et al. 2023). Land deals are often ‘a risky business’ (Li 2015), but the non-realisation, or only partial implementation, of planned investments may have far-reaching effects in terms of dispossession and displacement, and changes in land use. Initial studies show that the impacts that land deals—long after the initial investment or fanfare—have had on social relations, socio-ecological conditions and others may be far more extensive and complex than previously assumed (Antwi-Bediako et al. 2019, Baird 2020, Broegaard, Vongvisouk, and Mertz 2022, Engstrom 2020). This is one area that needs ongoing attention in research. The third category, the ‘pin prick’ type, may be less spectacular but also merits more attention. The commodification of community lands, for instance in parts of sub-Saharan Africa—whether via donor-supported certification schemes or through more informal vernacular land markets—is proceeding apace. Such processes of land rights formalisation and the consolidation of landholdings, even at a modest scale, have cumulative effects not

dissimilar to large-scale land deals, as urban-based businesspeople and civil servants push to secure rural landholdings (Jayne et al. 2019). Against the backdrop of neoliberal policies and disinvestment in smallholder farming, distress sales compound such concentration. Often led by such local elites or land brokers in alliance with external capital (Sitko and Jayne 2014), and done informally or led by the state in a politically-motivated effort to place large-scale land deals and smallholder plots side by side (as in the ‘leopard spot’ reforms in Cambodia, Beban 2021), such deals have transformed agrarian relations in many places (Friis and Nielsen 2016, Woods 2020, Xu 2018).

A decade ago, some of the most debated topics on impact and methodology were how operational land deals reshaped, or would potentially reshape, social relations, and what the appropriate methods were for studying them (Akram-Lodhi 2012, Cotula et al. 2014, Oya 2013, Scoones et al. 2013). Understanding how such investments have unfolded over the years is important, but there are more questions than answers. How have these investments affected labour, migration, and other investments, and what are the implications for class, race, generation, gender, ethnic and other relations in rural settings (Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Bezner Kerr 2017, Serrano 2023, Vigil 2022)? Much research in Africa especially has documented important dynamics, highlighting for example the diverse commercial models—from large estates to out-grower schemes—that emerged, with differing consequences for local livelihoods (Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2017; Smalley, Sulle, and Malale 2014, Tsikata and Yaro 2014). Work in Southeast Asia and Latin America has focused on the implications of particular crops, including ‘flex crops’ such as oil palm, sugarcane and trees (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2016, Borras et al. 2016, Kröger 2016, McKay et al. 2016). Meanwhile, studies of new and old plantation agriculture highlighted the many tensions around labour, race, environment and transformations of rural areas (Li 2018, Li and Semedi 2021, Wolford 2021b).

Many core questions of agrarian studies have been taken up in the research thus far, in relation to land grabbing and its outcomes. The literature has examined how, through such investments, gender relations and patterns of social reproduction change, as some people are employed on new large-scale estates, while others continue to rely on existing small village farms or precarious labour nearby (Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing 2012, Doss, Summerfield, and Tsikata 2014, Julia and White 2012, Park and White 2017, Prugl, Reysoo, and Tsikata 2021). Some scholars have assessed the implications of environmental and land use changes (see Benjaminsen and Ba 2019, Xu 2023 among others), as land is cleared, water is extracted and new forms of intensive agriculture are established, often using significantly more chemical inputs—as well as non-agricultural deals involving mining or other infrastructure (Bebbington et al. 2018, Chagnon et al. 2022, Hernández and Newell 2022). Others have analysed how social life is recast (Li 2018, Liao et al. 2023, Scheidel and Work 2018), or how capitalist enterprises generated spill-over impacts beyond their demarcated corporate boundaries whether because displaced people started new clearing in other forests (Franco and Borras 2019) or because pesticide and agrochemical contamination knows no administrative boundaries (Castro 2023).

Impacts have been shown to be distributed unevenly across social classes and groups, spaces and over time (Gyapong 2020, Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2015b), making it ever more urgent to assess earlier claims by investors and the states that such investments would bring social benefits such as employment, local industry, schools, and roads. Researchers need to engage with local communities to see if the benefits have been realised, and if so, for whom, and if not, why not. The non-realisation of promised benefits is among the reasons affected groups in local communities have mobilised in reaction to investments. Studies have shown how such

political responses from below have emerged, in support of and against the land deals - how and in what forms have such actions been carried out, and with what outcomes (Hall et al. 2015a). We can see how investments have transformed from their original aims and designs as the realities of different environments, market conditions, institutional factors and political contexts impinge. Investments that might be technically considered ‘failed,’ often leave behind significant changes, from deeper state oversight to ecological damage, massive dispossession, and new markets (Borras et al. 2022, Broegaard, Vongvisouk, and Mertz 2022, Cochrane et al. 2023, Engstrom 2020). One dynamic that stands out is the effort to mute protest or realise social benefits from land deals by providing space for local residents on land adjacent to large-scale investments (Cotula et al. 2014). Local residents are incorporated into the land deal through production contracts and required crop sales through the corporate investor or centralised distributor (receiving, in exchange, access to credit, inputs, and extension services). While these contract farming initiatives are touted as pro-poor, there is substantial research that suggests that they force small farmers to shoulder the risks while providing few benefits (Baird 2020, Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2017, McMichael 2012).

Early on, researchers flagged historical analysis as largely absent in the first generation of literature on land grabs (Alden Wily 2012, Edelman and León 2013). Longue durée perspectives are essential to contextualise and appreciate the full significance of processes underway (Dwyer 2022). The resurgence of academic and activist interest in contemporary land deals in the post-2008 period prompted a re-examination of historical processes of dispossession in the context of debates about restitution, reparations, and restorative justice. These discussions, which sometimes employed the language of ‘land grabbing,’ identified mechanisms of dispossession that previously received little systematic attention. In the United States, for example, many African American landowners and small farmers had their lands seized when local white elites conspired to raise their tax assessments, forcing them into foreclosure and loss of their properties (Van Sant 2016). This theft of Black land was a major setback in the accumulation possibilities of thousands of families and became a factor in the racial wealth gap (Bell 2015, Kahrl 2019). Other work addressed the historical precursors of the farm estate model in the colonies (Hall et al. 2017), and more broadly the articulation of new land deals with unresolved colonial questions (Zambakari 2017).

Historical perspectives have become even more urgent in today’s exploration of what happened to all of the land deals announced or initiated over the past decade or so. Making use of detailed, longitudinal analyses across different periods of land politics from across the world, we can get a better idea of how large-scale external investments affect different agrarian settings as well as wider rural politics and societies in general, going beyond the initial assessments of large-scale expropriation to examine how investments have integrated (or not, and maybe just failed) into different rural settings, including the less spectacular everyday forms of land accumulation (Edelman and León 2013, León 2023, McCarthy, Vel, and Afiff 2012, Mollet 2016, Sitko and Jayne 2014). This will require, at least, getting a better idea of how operational land deals, non-operational or failed land deals, and pin-prick land accumulation may have interacted with and shaped one another, and their broader impacts society-wide.

The above overview illustrates the richness of the literature produced in the past fifteen years on land deals (although we have certainly missed many things), but more questions remain. How do livelihoods change through differentiated accumulation processes as a result of land investments, affecting different people in different ways? What labour regimes emerge, with what features of permanent and casual labour; where are workers recruited from; what labour relations are constructed, with what labour rights and how do in-flows of labour, often from



migrant populations, change agrarian societies and their politics (Gyapong 2020)? How have land deals altered access to land and the autonomy and capacity of local communities to construct and defend their livelihoods (Nanhthavong et al. 2021)?

We look forward to more studies and discussion of these questions, particularly in the context of four dynamics that we consider to be critical today and going forward.

### *The increasing concentration of capital and land acquisition*

As we saw in the aftermath of the 2008-09 confluence of crises, the role of finance capital has emerged as an immensely important driver of land deals (McMichael 2012). It provides the motor for investment and the incentive for states and local elites to align themselves with outside investors. Local partners and state officials ease the bureaucratic process with both above-board and corrupt arrangements around investments and provide essential cultural ‘local knowledge’ (Clapp and Isakson 2018, Isakson 2014, Fairbairn 2014, Goldman 2020, Gutierrez 2023, Sommerville and Magnan 2015, Ouma, Johnson, and Bigger 2018, Visser 2017).

With land as the ‘new gold’ (Fairbairn 2020), the extraordinarily complex network of players involved in land deals has expanded. Finance houses across the world are linked to pension funds, insurance companies and private and state investors of all types in ways that are opaque and sometimes illegal. As land and nature become financialised and so part of global trading systems (Bruna 2022, Mendonça and Pitta 2022, Ouma, Johnson, and Bigger 2018), the politics of land, often in remote and inaccessible territories, is hooked in with global circuits of capital and finance in ways that earlier were inconceivable (Bernstein 2023, Salerno 2014). The concept of ownership has become depersonalised, prompting some scholars to ask not ‘who’ owns the land, but *what* owns the land (Ashwood et al. 2022). This corporate opacity has rendered conventional national and international institutional regulations (Margulis, McKeon, and Borrás Jr. 2013, Ouma 2020) increasingly ineffective.

The concentration of capital around the core actors involved in grabbing is striking. This means power and money are located in relatively few places, with boardrooms and shareholders far from the locations where land grabbing takes place. Whether we are talking of food and farming, mining and increasingly carbon/biodiversity, the companies (or in some cases corporatised NGOs in the world of conservation) that control land investments are linked into networks of corporate and finance capital - and drive further corporate concentration. Within the food system, for example, there are four main corporations that control 70 percent of the world’s agrochemicals market, four grain traders that control nearly 70 percent of staple foods, and 10 ‘Big Food’ firms control 34 percent of food and beverage processing, with similar levels of concentration in food retail (Clapp 2020, 2022: 46-48). Very often these companies control entire value chains from production through input supply to markets and trading, a process of integration achieved through mergers and acquisitions, and facilitated by digitalisation. This represents an extraordinary concentration of power and control (Levien, Watts, and Yan 2018).

Within the mining sector a similar pattern of concentration exists, with companies from certain origin countries, notably Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom being especially significant. State-owned Chinese enterprises dominate in several base metals, with major mining ventures in the mining belt of Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique—making important inroads into commodities such as lithium in recent years (Hernández and Newell 2022), as well as cobalt and manganese. New ‘corridor’ projects draw lines in anticipation of securing and concentrating capital, infrastructure, and commercial services, often to the surprise or

displeasure of local residents (Mkutu, Müller-Koné, and Atieno Owino 2021). In the area of conservation, some very powerful organisations, such as the Nature Conservancy and Conservation International, operate in ways similar to large private corporations despite their formal status as non-profits (Brockington and Duffy 2011, Thaler 2017). We see again a significant concentration of power and resources, facilitated by private philanthropies such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Bezos Foundation, around a particular agenda (such as ‘A Green Revolution for Africa,’ or AGRA) that too often involves the expropriation of resources from local populations, whether in Appalachia in the US or across Africa (Canfield 2023, Schetter, Mkutu, and Müller-Koné 2022, Schurman 2017).

The shifting global configuration of capital, its concentration and associated power, is a vital dimension of the land grabbing story internationally (Sosa and Gras 2021). Following the money (and the actors associated) through often shady connections to different sources of capital is a vital task for any investigation. A particular land deal may have connections to many people and places through complex webs of interlocking investments and circuits of capital, making approaches to policy and regulation, as well as organised resistance, incredibly challenging. Building skills to research capital—the modalities and strategies deployed by corporate agribusiness, mining, climate and finance capital—is now urgently needed among scholars in our field.

#### *New technologies enable increasingly ‘efficient’ extraction and dispossession*

Over the past decade, we have seen new technologies develop that have the potential to build on earlier financial mechanisms that helped engender land grabbing. Then it was chopping land up and repackaging it as derivatives that allowed land in faraway places to be included in hedge funds, pension funds, and more. Today, the use of blockchain and crypto currency is enabling individuals and corporations to acquire specific parcels of land, digitising claims for those who are best able to manipulate such currencies and platforms. This digital precision extends from farm to table, so to speak, as in China grocery-store shoppers scan a QR code that provides them with extensive information about the provenance and production of the item (de Seta 2023). People know much more about every pixel of the map than ever before, and this enables digital and distant forms of control for those who know how to manipulate the technology (Montenegro de Wit and Canfield 2023, Prause, Hackfort, and Lindgren 2020). At the same time, drones are being deployed as mechanisms of surveillance and discipline of workers (Prause 2021), for everything from contact-free identification of Covid-19 cases to identification of crops, pest and pathogen infestations, and houses on the land (Wolf and Wood 2023). When these technologies are in the hands of local inhabitants and indigenous peoples, they can be empowering and arguably could be enlisted in support of food sovereignty, but they are very often designed for and mobilised by those with financial capital, cultural know-how, and formal scientific education (Fraser 2020). Recent innovations include new techniques for registering land claims, from titles to geocoded smartphones that document every time an extension agent meets with a local farmer, seed seller, or distributor.

Once on the land, the focus is on precision agriculture, which includes everything from GPS-equipped machinery that enables nano-level communication between plant cells and computers so that farmers and investors “know” what the plants and soil want and can deliver it in increasingly precise doses. Research in international agriculture is already concentrated into six commodity crops (corn, soy, cotton, sugar, rice, and wheat) and now significant attention is devoted to new technologies far out of the reach of the average farmer. If farmers need to expend resources to purchase new tractors, data platforms, and digital technologies, they may

seek out production sites where labour and land are cheaper, in part because it isn't necessary to adhere to expensive regulations regarding working conditions and ecological preservation (Faxon and Wittekind 2023, Ofstehage, forthcoming). At the same time, social media can serve as a new technology for selling land in real time (Faxon 2023) or mobilising protests to secure rights to land.

Alongside digital technologies in farming, one of the most prevalent new technologies for accessing rural land is the rise in donor-supported efforts to register customary land rights, promote rural land markets, and render community land available for transactions, effectively paving the way for less contentious leasing or buying of land for large-scale investments. Often presented as a defence against land grabbing, and as a means to secure women's rights, this is especially the case in Africa, where between 80 and 90 percent of land is held under forms of informal and customary tenure and where certification and privatisation of land now occupies centre stage in place of earlier donor efforts to secure community rights in law (Boone 2019, Zamchiya and Musa 2023). Associated with the push to bring these territories into market exchange is, again, the role of international finance and venture capital (aided by ostensibly apolitical bi- or multilateral agencies, such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation, see Wolford 2015), some of which have pivoted away from the 'farmland funds' established in the early 2010s, instead promoting digital platforms including cloud-based and blockchain technology for mapping and registration, also promoted by agribusiness companies aiming to extend their markets. We therefore see how critique, along with the practical difficulties of negotiating and acquiring land, may have contributed to adjustment and re-strategising by 'land grabbers' in ways that deserve careful investigation and analysis.

#### *New institutional mechanisms, fora, and dynamics*

One response to the post 2007-08 round of land grabbing was the creation of new forms of policy and regulation. Many initiatives emerged, at country, regional, and international levels (Margulis, McKeon, and Borrás Jr. 2013). Regionally, for example, the work of the Pan African Parliament and the African Union was important, with multiple consultations and policy documents emerging, notably the African Union's Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa (AU 2009), which cited the 'new scramble' for the continent, and later its Guiding Principles on Large-Scale Land-Based Investment (AU 2016). Such efforts served a purpose, and helped build awareness amongst parliamentarians and national policymakers, but their impact was limited. For particular commodities there have been efforts to develop codes of conduct around investment and certification standards. For example, 'roundtables' of investors and governments have formed as a way to provide a framework around global commodities such as soya and oil palm (Afrizal et al. 2023, Pye 2019). Similar efforts are now underway with the carbon market and new standards for investment in offset schemes. At a global level the most significant effort emerged around the FAO-led Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (Castañeda et al. 2023, Seufert 2013). Of course the key word here, as in many other initiatives, was 'voluntary' and although the guidelines, roundtable initiatives and land policies had lots of good things to say, their implementation was patchy to say the least (FAO 2021, German 2022). Voluntary guidelines and discourses of corporate social responsibility, unsurprisingly, cannot refigure capitalism as an ethical order in which big capital is accountable for the well-being of those touched by its investments (O'Laughlin 2008).

Many such efforts assumed somewhat naively that governments both had the will and capacity to implement new regulations that would temper the voracious demand for land by investors.

Of course, many states were complicit and happy to ignore the regulations that they had all endorsed at international meetings, as they not only wanted investment to come into cash-strapped exchequers, but government officials often also benefited personally from land deals. These policy frameworks also assumed that a liberal system of governance, overseen and facilitated by international bodies like the United Nations would be accepted by everyone. They have not, and outcomes are varied, even within countries (Dieterle 2022). This liberal order, dominated by Western countries as part of a post-war consensus around ‘development’, faces increasing challenges from shifts in global economic and political configurations. Any global regulations must involve China, Russia, India, Brazil, Turkey, the Gulf States, and others, reflecting the new axes of power and influence. The geopolitics of capital and investments in land have changed, whether this emerges through the expanded BRICS grouping or through other initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Callaghan and Hubbard 2016), complex investment routes such as the modern Silk Road, that is, the Belt and Road Initiative or BRI (Huang 2016, Oliveira et al 2020), the global food regime (Green 2022, Henderson 2022, McMichael 2020), or the fluid and dynamic trajectories of global (indirect) land use change (Calmon 2020).

National governments around the world are well aware of the new geopolitical configurations and frequently trade off agreements with different powers. Clinging to a western vision of a regulatory system rooted in post-World War II institutions is inadequate and new arrangements need to emerge. The old levers of western development aid, Bretton Woods institution loan conditionality, shareholder involvement in large corporations, and even standard forms and strategies of civil society mobilisation will do little or nothing to influence many of the new and most significant investors in land across the world. We therefore point to a chasm between the world of multilateral policymaking and guidelines, and the political economy of transnational development and investment finance.

### *The continued and ever more salient rise of green grabbing*

One of our earliest collections identified the phenomenon of ‘green grabs’, defined broadly as land grabs in the name of the environment (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). These included the removal of land from public use by conservation investments (Arsel and Buscher 2012, Brockington 2002, Brockington and Duffy 2011, Buscher and Fletcher 2015, Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012, Corbera 2012, Ojeda 2012). But the scale and importance of ‘green grabbing’ has grown massively since then. The rising policy importance of climate change in particular has resulted in a huge expansion of investments focused on the ‘green transition’. Land-based investments sit uncomfortably in this conjuncture because there is good evidence that transitioning land from smallholder agriculture to large-scale, intensive commodity production will increase carbon emissions (Liao et al. 2021). At the same time, land deals may also be proposed as carbon offsets projects, responding to the rapid growth in the voluntary carbon market, or they may involve investments in land-extensive alternative energy facilities, such as solar or wind farms (Dunlap 2020, Hudlet-Vazquez et al. 2023, Stock and Birkenholtz 2021, Torres Contreras 2023), or the acquisition of land for mining for rare metals such as lithium and cobalt for batteries (Hernández and Newell 2022).

Compared to even a decade ago, the extent of such investment is staggering. Several factors are driving this, including the ‘net zero’ commitments of countries and companies as part of international climate agreements. Many such commitments involve offsetting agreements, and while that is a highly volatile process with some forecasters predicting a decrease in carbon prices and others arguing they will rise over the next five to ten years, the voluntary carbon

market is still currently valued at several billion dollars. This is driving carbon offset developers to seek out projects that ‘avoid deforestation’ or involve tree planting in large plantations, which is the easiest way of gaining verified carbon credits. Projects such as Kariba in Zimbabwe, Kuzuko in South Africa, the Reforestation Project in Panama, and several more in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Peru, for instance, involve huge areas of land, often in marginal areas and in indigenous territories, with companies managing carbon notionally together with communities and local governments (Blake 2023, Leach and Scoones 2015, Müller 2020). Not only do such projects offer limited climate mitigation, but they also bring few benefits to the communities involved (Schwartzman 2022). New initiatives to encourage regulation of the carbon market have set standards, but few are implemented to date and there are multiple accreditation agencies that offer stamps of approval for the projects of their international clients.

A similar dynamic is emerging around the so-called ‘green energy transition’. The need to move away from reliance on fossil fuels to meet Paris climate commitments has prompted huge investments globally in renewable energy (Stock and Birkenholtz 2021). While this may be a good thing for the climate, it has consequences for places where such investments take place. Whether it is wind or solar farms, geothermal or biogas generation, such investments require significant areas of land, and companies making the investments must gain secure control over the land from land users. Sometimes this is on communal land so companies broker agreements with local authorities or the state, but sometimes it is within indigenous territories or on private land, where farmers have plots. The result is a reconfiguration of land control and an appropriation of land, even if leased and even if landowners get some payment. The land politics of energy investments in diverse areas across the world, such as Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Mozambique and Kenya, is a theme that has emerged with great intensity in the last decade or so, and can only become more important as the energy transition proceeds (Alonso Serna 2023, Bruna 2022, Torres Contreras 2022).

The demand for ‘clean’ and ‘green’ energy is also generating a mining rush, as rare metals for batteries are acquired by mining companies (Hernández and Newell 2022). Lithium is the most important resource, and China is at the forefront of exploration and development of lithium mines and manufacturing. Big deposits exist in Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina (‘the lithium triangle’), as well as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Mali, and the United States. Land deals for mining usually involve the state, but few environmental and social safeguards are in place (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016). These mining ‘grabs’ occur across a range of mineral resources, including lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper, graphite, and manganese, and often take place in new areas where mining has not been practised before. Negotiations over land for these new mining ventures are contentious and contested, as Namaganda, Otsuki, and Steel (2022) show for Mozambique’s fraught Cabo Delgado province, Mejía-Muñoz and Babidge (2023) show for Chile, and Hernández and Newell (2022) show for Latin America’s lithium triangle (see also Riofrancos forthcoming)

While climate mitigation through carbon offsets and the drive for alternative energy investments are probably the most prominent forms of ‘green grabbing’ today, there are others, and across resources – including water grabbing, ocean grabbing and land grabbing for biodiversity and conservation (Barbesgaard 2018). Just as the climate has risen on the international policy agenda, so has protecting biodiversity. This is all for the good, but again we must ask how this is being done and with what consequences. The demarcation of large areas of land for conservation through the creation of national parks (and before that hunting blocks) has been part of environmental policies since the colonial era (Lunstrum 2016,

Marijnen and Verweijen 2016). However, in recent years, demand for land for biodiversity protection has grown, driven by a range of initiatives, the most high-profile being the 30x30 programme to protect 30 percent of all land for nature by 2030, led by the governments of France, the UK and Costa Rica. This effort has been widely critiqued, as most land identified as in need of protection to meet biodiversity conservation targets is already being used, often by indigenous peoples. The 30x30 programme has also stirred fears among economically precarious land users, giving rise, in the United States at least, to fantastical right-wing conspiracy theories and a broader push back against environmental protection and government and UN ‘intervention’ (Harman 2015).

Much research shows that the best protectors of land are local land users, and that the creation of protected areas with huge investment in fencing and guards may undermine conservation objectives (Brockington 2002, Brockington and Duffy 2011, Kothari, Camill, and Brown 2023). Yet ‘fortress conservation’ is back as the dominant paradigm: the militarisation or securitisation of conservation often occurs through the deployment of private security services employed by private conservation organisations that are contracted by governments or take long leases on land. This changes the dynamics of land use and tenure (Duffy et al. 2019). In northern Kenya, for example, so-called community conservancies are highly controversial as they can undermine the practices of pastoralists, reducing mobility and restricting territory, while some accuse conservancy operators of human rights abuses as conservation becomes more violent and exclusionary (Schetter, Mkutu, and Müller-Koné 2022).

In sum, while during the first phase of LDPI we had identified ‘green grabbing’ as an emerging phenomenon, and we collected cases in a much-read special issue and book (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2013, see also Scoones et al. 2024), today it has exploded – in far more places, with more actors and with much deeper consequences. While addressing climate change and protecting biodiversity are unquestionably important policy priorities, an urgent task is to interrogate the design, implementation and impact of ‘green’ projects that have consequences for land and livelihoods (see Liao and Agrawal, 2024). Green grabbing has mutated, bringing in subtle versions that involved indirect land use and spill-over effects (Franco and Borrás 2019, 2021) as well as the grey area of climate smart agriculture and related mitigation and adaptation measures (Clapp, Newell, and Brent 2018, Hunsberger, Work, and Herre 2018, Taylor 2018).

#### *Authoritarian populism, resistance, and consent*

Changes in national politics have also shaped the roll-out and performance of land deals over the last ten to fifteen years. The global swing towards forms of (mostly) right-wing authoritarian populism has profound implications in the rural world (Scoones et al. 2018). Many disenfranchised, marginalised people in rural areas are easily swayed by populist appeals to rural and agrarian regeneration. Promising to bring investment and offering improvements after years of neglect can appeal to a disillusioned electorate. Combined with radical populist (sometimes neo-fascist) rhetoric about land and ‘the people’ in opposition to a liberal, urban cosmopolitan elite, the attraction of such parties has been powerful, whether in Europe, Latin America, the United States, Africa or Asia (Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021, Mamonova and Franquesa 2020, Roman-Alcalá, Graddy-Lovelace, and Edelman 2021, Coronado 2019). Such populist positions—dressed up in arguments about investment and reversing longstanding biases against rural populations—can help justify land grabs as authoritarian elites ally with investors (McCarthy 2019).

A major priority for research on global land grabbing therefore must include an assessment of shifts both in geopolitical configurations and national politics, and how these provide the basis for alliances of political elites and local and international investors to expropriate land, often with new rationales, deploying populist, anti-colonial/anti-western rhetoric to justify new forms of land control (Dwyer 2022, Kham 2023). Alongside individual land deals, and on a bigger scale, we see a raft of nationalist, authoritarian and even imperialist political projects, with demagogic figures nurturing territorial ambitions and revanchist dreams of restoring past or imagined imperial territories. Many have neocolonial dimensions, rather than constituting land ‘deals’. This is most clearly the case with Putin’s Russia, Netanyahu’s Israel, Orban’s talk about greater Hungary, Turkey’s attacks on Kurdish regions, Venezuela’s campaign to claim the two-thirds of Guyana in the Essequibo region, and even Trump’s wacky plan to buy Greenland. Derek Hall has remarked on how analyses of the impact on global food security of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine fail to ‘conceptualize Russia’s violent seizure of vast areas of Ukrainian farmland and of water and mineral resources as a “land and resource grab” (Hall 2022, 27). The same might be said of land grabbing research more broadly, which has largely neglected to include within its scope geopolitically motivated expansion. Whether policy frameworks, regulations, commodity standards, and environmental and social responsibility assessments can gain traction within this politics is a moot point. And in turn, critical analysis of this new political-economic context needs to inform the strategies and tactics of global mobilisation around land by civil society and social movements.

Whether it is large farms, mining, conservation areas or energy investments, investors frequently and fallaciously claim that the areas they target are marginal or ‘unused’ (but see Messerli et al 2014). Many are in varying forms of a commons (Agrawal, Erbaugh, and Pradhan 2023, Dell’Angelo et al 2017). These are the new frontiers for land grabbing of increasingly diverse forms (Rasmussen and Lund 2018). There are cases where the state has a firm claim to and control of areas, and through such centralised control facilitated appropriation and reallocation of land, such as in Ethiopia (Belay 2023, Moreda 2017, Rahmato 2011). As elsewhere, in much of Africa where post-colonial states nationalised land, undoing the privatisation embarked on by colonial powers, governments have exerted authority as custodians to drive land deals (Alden Wiley 2012, Hall et al 2015b, Wolford and Nehring 2015). There are also areas where central state control and regulation are fragmented, frequently because it is fiercely contested from below by various anti-central government forces. In such situations private operators have more room to manoeuvre, often dealing with the central state and its adversaries simultaneously, engaging through local state and traditional authorities, employing their own security forces and demarcating areas with or without regulatory approval through deals struck with key power holders within the central state or the latter’s adversaries, as is the case of Myanmar (Franco and Borrás 2019, Ra 2023, Ra et al. 2021, Woods 2011).

As a result, the ‘governance’ context of such deals is often highly conflictual, with shifting forms of authority and therefore contested forms of land control (Peluso and Lund 2011, Wolford et al. 2013). Even though in many countries there have been official efforts to confirm ‘indigenous territories’ and registration of ‘community land’ for ethnic minorities, pastoralists and others, these commitments are often not upheld. On paper they may exist, but in practice are routinely flouted. This means co-optation of local elites is possible, with companies paying off people to secure access and overriding collective rights. Where this happens, companies may use instruments of consent such as Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) to get a section of the community’s leadership to sign an agreement, thereby dividing the communities and facilitating their entry and dominance (German 2022). In other places the state and companies

fan the flames of conflict between indigenous or ethnic communities versus settlers or small farmers, as in the many cases in Colombia (Arango 2023, Rojas 2023). This divide-and-rule tactic of companies using formal collective land rights and institutional regulation is an important issue in many parts of the world. In Africa, pastoralists are often caught up in such contests over land as new investments arrive, with extensive pastoral areas increasingly becoming the target for a growing ‘carbon rush’ (German et al. 2017, Hassan, Nathan, and Kanyinga 2023, Lind, Okenwa, and Scoones 2020, Nunow 2015, Scoones 2023, Letai 2015).

Sometimes deals are struck peacefully where the state and investors obtain consent from the affected communities, but too often various forms of extra-economic coercion (from outright violence to silent or slow types of violence) are a feature of such land deals (Hall 2013, Levien 2018, van Leeuwen and van der Haar 2016). Ostensibly voluntary land transactions frequently provoke conflicts within communities, as different interests coalesce for and against these deals. Violence tends to be worse in settings where the commodities that are being grabbed are illicit or highly valuable and there are different groups competing over their control. This is especially the case where the cultivation of illicit crops, such as coca and poppy, is involved, as drug gangs and narco-capitalists often linked to armed insurgents and violent drug cartels, become involved in land grabbing (Ballvé 2020, Ciro 2018, McSweeney et al. 2018). In other cases, such as in Myanmar, land grabbing has also been carried out by criminalising poppy cultivation by farmers and pushing for crop substitution that on many occasions proved to be simply facilitating and legitimating land grabs (Lu, Dev, and Petersen-Rockney 2022). Conflict, violence and illicit trade, and in some cases the land politics of extremist political-military groups (Benjaminsen and Ba 2019), means that such areas become complex zones for the state and paramilitaries or other armed actors and negotiations over land and resources become part of a complicated network of arrangements, backed up by arms and violence (del Pilar Peña-Huertas et al. 2017, Fajardo 2014, Grajales 2012, Gutiérrez-Sanín, Castillo, and Cristancho-Bohada 2023, Namaganda, Otsuki, and Steel 2022, Vargas 2022). Understanding land and resources as central to violent conflict, secessionist movements and armed insurgency is an important angle on land grabbing, and one that is essential to consider if wider initiatives to secure peace and stability in such regions are to be achieved (Kramer 2021).

The counterpoint to violent imposition is resistance, and there are many instances of resistance against land grabs (Alonso-Fradejas 2015, Gerber 2011, Hall et al 2015a). But as is well-known, the autonomy and capacity of the exploited and the oppressed to resist and struggle are dependent on many variables: availability of elite allies, splits among the ranks of adversaries or elites, allies within the state, organised broad mass base, logistics and effective leadership (sub)nationally and transnationally (Benford and Snow 2000, Tarrow 2011). Often, these conditions are not available to resisters in a particular land case. This problem is even more severe in agrarian settings where patron-client relations involving either private or state elites are prevalent and where poor people give up their option to resist in exchange for some material and political gains from the patrons (Kerkvliet 2009, Scott 1976). This, alongside the potency of the systematic divide-and-rule tactic that companies use in collusion with the state, makes it unsurprising that many, perhaps even most, local communities negatively impacted by land grabs do not engage in overt, structured and organised resistance. Instead, affected social groups engage in individual, covert everyday forms of resistance—what James Scott (1986) calls the ‘weapons of the weak’: foot dragging, diversion of energy and resources and so on (Alonso-Fradejas 2015, Hall et al. 2015a, Moreda 2015, Sändig 2021). Resistance may highlight cultural representations of associations with land and resources through songs, poems and storytelling, while activists may work with those organising resistance to develop forms of counter-mapping encouraging the local assertion of rights to land (Chapin and Threlkeld 2001,



Suhardiman, Giordano, and Kenney-Lazar 2019). Where protestors are able to mobilise the law or legal experts, and it can be proven that historical or legislative rights were abrogated, there may be some protections (Coronado 2022).

Curiously, there has been a variant that has evolved especially in the 1990s and 2000s in China where peasant farmlands was expropriated mostly by local governments and largely for urban, industrial and commercial spatial expansion. Here, the protests also took the form of individual and everyday acts, but instead of being covert, they have been overt. O'Brien and Li (2006) call it 'rightful resistance'. The height of the protests probably lasted for 20 years but started to taper off during the past decade (Andreas et al. 2020, Walker 2008).

On the few occasions where affected local communities were able to organise and resist, the outcome has not always been to stop land grabs or to reverse dispossession—but often violent retribution from either the company or the state or both. Sadly, the combination of violent grabbing and organised resistance has seen the growing tragedy of murders of environmental and land defenders (Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019, Scheidel et al. 2020). Mobilising the law has proven effective in some cases, but Finally, a more common occurrence, which is less acknowledged in the literature, is that groups of people mobilised not to resist land grabs, but to seek incorporation into the emerging or promised capitalist enterprises, whether as contracted farmers or as wage workers or both, or to negotiate the terms of their dispossession often in the form of monetary compensation. A similar range of responses is present where land grabs involve extractivist projects (Conde and Le Billon 2017).

The diverse political reactions from below result from the variables relevant to political mobilizations that we flagged earlier, but also depend on how much was taken in relation to how much is left. There are many cases where villagers' lands were taken and they were expelled from their home lots and farmland; in others places they have been evicted from their farmland but not their residential areas; and still in other places, villagers were not expelled but their access to land/nature was reduced or curtailed. Dispossession can derive from various mechanisms, unfolded in complex processes and with diverse outcomes in part depending on pre-existing social structures, institutions, and the political agency of key actors (Arias and Fernández 2017, Xu 2023). These factors shape the reaction(s) from affected populations, as explored and discussed by Suhardiman et al. (2015) and ultimately the fate and trajectory of land deal enterprises (Sulle 2020).

Reversibility of land deals is a crucial concern, theoretically, and politically. Should the current waves of dispossession and alienation be viewed as permanent? What has happened to the 'grab land back' movements? In their monumental history of world agriculture, Mazoyer and Roudart (2012) observe that in the majority of historical cases of dispossession and large-scale farming except the contemporary land rush, subsequent regimes under pressure from below have opted for economic progress and social peace by breaking down these large holdings in favour of more efficient and socially acceptable smallholder farming. But is such pressure from below evident now, to contest and reverse the land rush?

### **Going forward: empirical, activist, and academic challenges**

Over the last decade the sources of data on land acquisitions have improved, alongside the methodologies for assessing land use change and investment patterns. This has occurred in part through technological improvements in field data collection, satellite imagery and the management of registries and other databases. It has been helped by considerable investment in global databases – such as the Land Matrix – and the continuous improvement of the quality

of the data (Anseeuw et al. 2012, Anseeuw et al. 2013, Lay et al. 2021, Nolte, Chamberlain, and Giger 2016). With the raising of the alarm around land grabs, accompanied by much media coverage, companies at least from some parts of the world are now much more assiduous about recording their investments, in part to comply with their ESG (environmental, social, and governance) criteria, which boards and shareholders increasingly require. This is a far cry from the initial estimates of land grab acreage a decade ago, when the data were highly suspect (Edelman 2013, Oya 2013, Zoomers, Gekker, and Schäfer 2016). There was wide variability in the range of figures presented by different groups, often reflecting a political position on the issue or NGO fundraising imperatives. Today, with more systematic documentation of particular investments, the data on particular types of investments, especially formal corporate ones, seems to be less controversial and debated.

However there remain significant gaps. Many companies involved in land investments have no obligations to report, and indeed much remains hidden. The layers of shell companies that exist around certain operations mean that tracing who is involved and what is happening is close to impossible. While Wikileaks and the release of the Panama and Pandora papers revealed some information, they only confirmed that we actually know very little. National governments also are often poor at recording what is going on. Sometimes this is deliberate, as corrupt deals are negotiated and hidden, but sometimes it is simply due to lack of capacity. Land registries are poorly maintained, there are few staff available to record and check on investments, and the survey and audit capacities of governments are weak. For all these reasons, the high-sounding ideals of voluntary guidelines of all sorts do not get addressed or implemented.

The assumption that better data will lead to better regulation and fewer abuses during land investments—as argued for example in the VGGT—is of course not always borne out. States may invest in data collection to increase surveillance and assert control, but this does not necessarily improve the livelihoods of people affected by land deals. In fact, it may be the opposite, as the capacity to assert state control over land may facilitate land deals. Better data therefore does not necessarily lead to better policy and practice, and it is in this area that more efforts are required. This is especially true in relation to the small-scale pin prick type of land accumulation that is quite extensive in terms of aggregated geographic scope, and is not captured in any existing database. This is where local insights into land investment dynamics are essential, rooted in grounded, contextual information on local politics, interests, and alliances. This is not available via satellite images or survey data but requires closer engagement in the process. Local activists, in alliance with researchers, have had a positive impact in getting leases cancelled at Kilwa in Tanzania, Massingir in Mozambique and across several sites in Madagascar - yet some of these were resurrected in new forms), as well as many others too where, despite local information, land deals proceeded with many negative consequences (see for instance Lind, Okenwa, and Scoones 2020, Neef et al. 2023, Oliveira, McKay, and Liu 2021, and Yang and He 2021).

The wider availability of data on land investments (despite the clear limitations) has, however, opened up debate about how land grabs articulate with other important policy issues. For example, looking at land and water together in a wider picture of how whole land use systems are being transformed offers important insights (Dell'Angelo, Rulli, and d'Odorico 2018, Rulli, Saviori, and d'Odorico. 2013), while assessing the implications of land conversions through land deals on carbon budgets and greenhouse gas emissions links land grabbing to climate change and mitigation priorities (Liao et al. 2023). Changes in land use following investments can have major implications for biodiversity, with changes in ecological patterns affecting habitats, overall species richness and biodiversity, the survival of ecologically important

keystone species, migratory bird nesting sites and much more (Schulte et al. 2016). Meanwhile, assessments of deforestation through land clearances from land investments for agriculture, mining and infrastructure can help us understand risks from zoonotic spill-over and how pandemic threats change as a result of land grabbing (Wallace 2016), and ultimately how to embed sustainability science with real world politics (Bebbington et al. 2018).

Land grabbing is not just an agrarian issue therefore, but is linked to much wider questions of climate, biodiversity, pandemic risk and more. This requires a much more systematic tracing of impacts and consequences of land grabs beyond the immediate agrarian and other rural livelihood impacts, and calls for different methodologies and skillsets. This equally suggests that many more policy actors—and researchers and activists—need to engage with the issues of land grabbing than has been the case in the past. There is a need to go beyond the individual case study, even though rich, in-depth descriptions of land grab dynamics are important. Case studies need to be approached both longitudinally—how have processes evolved over time—and comparatively, looking at diverse experiences and learning lessons across these. We also need to ensure that case study analyses are connected to wider analyses of shifting circuits of capital, configurations of finance and changing geopolitics in order to make sense of why land grabbing processes have played out in the way they have. Policy-wise and politically, it is problematic to assume that land grabs can be addressed case by case without linking the cases to system-wide policy and political questions. Multiscalar research is needed to understand systemic drivers and dynamics, so as to contextualise field-based manifestations.

Land grabbing must be understood in relation to wider debates—about climate, biodiversity, environmental crisis, pandemic prevention, food security and diet, and so on. Despite emerging empirical studies, we still do not know much of the character and extent of impacts of land grabs on the environment, and more empirical research is needed. Agrarian dynamics are intimately intertwined with these processes, and an analytical and policy challenge is to unpack these connections and understand the wider implications (Agrawal, Brown, and Sullivan 2019, Meyfroidt et al. 2022, Moore 2017, Müller et al. 2021, Ribot 2022), as for example the inseparability of land and water (Cortesi 2021). This has implications for audiences, as well as forms of mobilisation ensuring that land and investment are seen within a wider context. An emerging research and political front is what Lena Hommes and colleagues pinpointed as the new water justice movements (NWJMs) in the context of ‘riverhood’ (Hommes, Vos, and Boelens 2023), or combining land struggles and climate justice struggles, that is, for agrarian climate justice (Calmon, Jacovetti, and Koné 2021, Sekine 2021).

Land is central to questions of violence, conflict, but also peace and reconstruction. Land was at the heart of anti-colonial struggles, but long after countries gained independence, relations of land control remain a faultline in state-society. This means thinking about land in relation to rights, citizenship and how territories are constructed within contemporary nation states and how, for example, ‘indigenous’ rights to land, culture and territory are negotiated today in relation to investment imperatives, as well as in the context of populist, authoritarian regimes of rule (Anthias 2018). Despite questions of land often being pushed to the side in national political conversations and global debates about ‘development’, recognising its centrality encourages a recasting of debates about state-citizens relations and political-economic development (Mamdani 1996, Schoneveld and Shete 2014, Sud 2020, Lund 2023).

Perhaps one of the greatest shortcomings of the literature over the past decade is the scant work on gender and generation. Although LDPI has from the beginning included a focus on gender dynamics, and after some years also generational dynamics, the response to calls for research

proposals and papers on these topics was disappointing (Hall et al. 2015b, 482-3). There have been some important exceptions in the literature that addressed not only the ways in which land grabbing has gendered outcomes but also how the politics and processes of deal-making, consultation, compensation and consent are profoundly gendered (Chu 2011, Chung 2017, Ndi 2019, Ossome 2022), but more is needed. We can happily report that gendered perspectives have figured more prominently in our most recent round of calls, and we expect to see lively discussions on these themes in Bogotá. Generational dimensions, however, have remained largely neglected, despite their obvious relevance in any discussions on the longer-term impacts of, and responses to, dispossession (Li 2017; White 2020, 43-49).

Finally, we in LDPI and others involved in research and action on land deals should ask ourselves difficult questions about the purpose and impact of our work. After all the hundreds of studies, the conferences, the publications and the scholar-activist interactions that we and others have promoted, we have learned a lot, and we believe that we have provoked awareness of the politics of land deals among policymakers and broader communities. But what else have we achieved? If we hope that our efforts can contribute to changing the world, to whom has our work spoken, and with what effect? Have any governments or other powerful bodies listened, or changed tack—and if so, what new approaches have emerged? Are the new terminologies and analyses of land grabbing useful amidst the world's current crises that are rooted in questions of land and territorial control—Russia's war in Ukraine or Israel's occupation of and attacks on Palestine? We acknowledge that the old and new regulatory frames have not achieved much, and notwithstanding spectacular failures, the grabs go on, both as pin pricks and at grand scale. Is this inevitable, a reflection of the unstoppable march of new forms of capitalism in the countryside? Is the era of small-farm survival within the interstices of capitalism finally coming to an end? Indeed, the current UN Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028 (UNDFP) is playing out largely unnoticed around the world. The UNDFP affirms the position of *La Via Campesina*, that most if not all crops can be produced effectively and efficiently by petty commodity producers on small-scale farms, delivering social as well as economic benefits. But is it really the scale, or rather the form of ownership and operation of farm units, that we should be concerned about?

## **Conclusion**

This essay has posed many questions. Each of the themes highlighted in this note have seen both continuities and changes since 2007-08. This essay does not provide a comprehensive synthesis (far from it), nor does it aim to provide conclusions, but rather to provoke and stimulate debate.

To respond to the questions in this essay (and many others), in 2022 the original coordinating group of LDPI joined together with a much wider network to promote a new initiative. We launched a small grants competition for early career researchers from the Global South in early 2023, allowing the writing up of research on contemporary land grabs. We were overwhelmed by the response, with over 700 applications for only 27 grants. The resulting papers, and many others, will be presented at a major conference to be held in Colombia in March 2024 and will provide a solid empirical core for wider deliberations. There has been a similarly enthusiastic response to the open call for papers for the conference, which will be co-hosted by five universities in Bogotá and the autonomous research institution Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular Programa Por la Paz (CINEP), together with social movement activists and key members of the Colombian government.

We hope that a return to the ‘land grabbing’ debate, and its multiple permutations that have emerged over the past decade or so, will encourage continued interest in the theme in academia and renewed interest from the media and policymakers. Most importantly, we seek to situate land and land politics at the centre of discussions about contemporary capitalism, geopolitics and development.

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## LDPI Working Paper Series

More than a decade ago, the Land Deals Politics Initiative ([LDPI](#)) was launched as a loose network of scholars and activists concerned about the rise of land, water and green grabs across the world and the consequences for rural livelihoods and agrarian relations. A massive wave of investment in land, resulting in expropriation and displacement had emerged following the financial, food and energy crises of 2008-09. We wanted to understand what was going on and how best to respond. Between 2009–2019, LDPI organised a series of events to analyse the social, economic, political and environmental dynamics of large-scale land deals and their implications for policy and social movements. LDPI funded significant research and contributed to a considerable body of published scholarly research on land deals, all of which shaped policy discussions and informed numerous initiatives such as the FAO's Tenure Guidelines.

The global debate around land deals has diminished in the last several years, but important research and political questions remain. What happened to the thousands of land grabs documented by researchers, non-governmental organisations, activist groups, news media, and aid agencies? What new configurations of land, labour and capital have emerged since? How has the rise of authoritarian, state-led populism and politics re-shaped the tensions between 'foreignisation' and extraction? The LDPI Working Paper Series will compile papers that aim to address some of these questions.

### **Global land deals:**

#### **What has been done, what has changed, and what's next?**

In 2010, the Land Deals Politics Initiative formed to study the rising number of large-scale land deals taking place around the world. As the so-called 'global land grab' took shape, we organised small grant competitions to generate more empirical research into the phenomenon, and we organised conferences to debate the parameters and dynamics from the local level to the global. In this article, we take stock of what has been written about land grabbing as well as the way in which the context has changed since 2010. We highlight the ongoing need for research, as well as the changing nature of financial capital, the institutional "reforms" that resulted from calls for change, new technologies that have emerged to measure and distribute land access, the role of climate change in underpinning powerful new green grabs, and the changing geopolitical context that challenges resistance even as people struggle to retain their access to land. Finally, in the lead up to the 2024 Conference on Global Land Grabbing in Bogotá, Colombia, we highlight several challenges for the next decade of research on global land grabbing.