

Workshop

Global land rush and democratic governance in host countries

Organized by Cambodia Research Group, VU University Amsterdam
(www.cambodiaresearch.org)

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Call for Papers

Aim

The intent is to explore the relationship between the recent global land rush and the quality of democratic governance in different developing countries hosting rising influx of foreign capital. The workshop will discuss a few questions including observable impacts of global land rush in host countries, its contribution to the advancement or obstruction of hosting countries' progress toward democratic governance; and feasible strategies to overcome the difficulty of widespread land conflicts and other adverse impacts. Specific attention will be paid to impacts on possibilities for/shifts towards inclusive development within weak governance contexts. The outcome of the workshop is intended as a seminal contribution to the comparative debate on land tenure security, the politics of land reform, and political economy in developing countries in Asia and Africa; both continents are the main targets of large-scale land acquisitions.

Rationale

The last decade saw an increasing global interest in the acquisition of farmland. The International Land Coalition, a consortium of organizations undertaking research on global commercial pressure on land, reported that at least 71 million hectares of completed land deals between 2000 and 2010. If international land deals under consideration/negotiation are also taken into account, the total land area would reach 203 million hectares for the same period. This figure may not include many other deals that have not been reported.¹ The surge in land acquisition is likely to continue due to the factors that drive it including:

-Food security concerns among economically prosperous nations with poor endowment in land. The rise of global population, increasing attention to bio-fuel production, changing consumption patterns and other factors contributed to rising demand for food

¹ Ward Anseeuw, Lix Alden Wily, Lorenzo Cotula, and Michael Taylor, *Land Rights and the Rush for Land* (...:International Land Coalition, 2012), p.4.

globally.² The surge in food price, which rose by 83 percent between 2005 and 2008 pushed many nations to reconsider food security policy.³

-Rising incentives for investors to acquire land including “government backed deal,” expectation of high rates of return from agricultural investment due to high food price, and government’s biofuel consumption target (eg. in the EU), and attractive national level/host countries’ policies⁴.

The intensified commercial interests in land in developing countries create both development opportunities and risks. The opportunities are associated with capital for investment in agriculture, infrastructural development, and employment generation potential for rural communities brought about by serious investors who adhere to the Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) principles. The risks are associated with weak governance that could result in dispossession of rural poor, loss of means of livelihood, and environmental damage for most of the host countries.

Poor public sector governance is at the forefront of this social and environmental concern. Recent work carried out by Anseeuw et al. (2012) found that negative impacts on the rural poor emerged for governance failure in four areas: weak democratic governance, land governance that disfavors the poor, economic governance that favors only investors, and the sidelining of smallholders, all of which contribute to discretionary allocation of land and discourage good decision making.⁵ Further risks are the perpetuation of such weak governance, which Anseeuw et al. described as “feeding a vicious circle: the rush for land is in turn aggravating and worsening each of these [the four] governance factors”.⁶

A tremendous amount of efforts worldwide has been put into documenting local community experience with the influx of foreign direct investment in agriculture. However, the causes and consequences of intensified commercial interests in land on public sector and/or democratic governance in host countries have not yet been systematically explored. Exploring this defies answers. For some countries, foreign commercial interests are only a part of the story. However, what is frequently overlooked is the national elites’ role in land acquisition, which gives rise to speculative interests doing the ground work in expectation of quick profit earning opportunities with the arrival of new foreign capital; often with disastrous consequence for their engagement in illegal land expropriation in the context of poor governance and unequal power

² See Irene A. Kuntjoro and Pau Khan Khup Hangzo, *The Challenges and Opportunities of Land Acquisition in Southeast Asia*, NTS Perspective No. 7 (Singapore: RSIS Center for Non-Traditional Security Studies, 2011).

³ See for Example, Anuradha Mittal, *The 2008 Food Price Crisis: Rethinking Food Security Policies*, G24 Discussion Paper Series No. 56 (New York/Geneva: the United Nations, 2009) http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/gdsmdpg2420093_en.pdf

⁴ Lorenzo Cotula, Sonja Vermeulen, Rebeca Leonard and James Keely, *Land Grab or Development Opportunity? : Agricultural Investment and International Land Deals in Africa* (London/Rome: IIED/FAO/IFAD, 2009), p. 4-5.

⁵ Anseeuw, 2012, p. 6.

⁶ Anseeuw, 2012, p. 6.

relations.⁷ These speculative interests emerged in part from weak governance and can also contribute to regulatory and policy bias, obstruction of due processes, and other corrupting influences leading to the perpetuation of weaknesses in public sector governance. Some poor countries may have progressive legal provision governing rights of access to land for all people including the poor; however, the gap between what is on paper and on the ground reality place a heavy toll on the poor while creating difficulties for serious and responsible investors. What is needed is scholarly analysis of the variations within specific countries' contexts and inquiry into the effects of the variations on governance and its outcomes.

This workshop will therefore seek to answer three sets of questions:

- 1- What are the observable impacts of the intensified commercial interests in land on hosting countries? What are host countries' responses to the intensified commercial interests in land? At policy level? Community level?
- 2- How does the global land rush affect the aspects of the rule of law, democratic governance, and state society relations in host countries? Does it contribute to the advancement/impediment in democratic governance? What explains the variation of the effects?
- 3- What are feasible strategies to overcome the difficulty of widespread land conflicts and other adverse impacts within weak governance contexts?

Guideline for submission

We invite abstracts (400-450 words in length) to be sent to sokbso@fulbrightmail.org (cc. H.Dahles@fsw.vu.nl) by March 1, 2012.

⁷ Cf. Annelies Zoomers, Globalisation and the foreignisation of space: seven processes driving the current global land grab. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2010, 37(2):429-447; also *Journal of Peasant Studies* special issue, 2011, 38(5).