Reframing the Land Grab Debate: The Need to Broaden and Deepen the Agenda

Annelies Zoomers, Guus van Westen

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This article does not present new evidence about the land rush, but reveals the urgent need of broadening the debate by including a few key issues that are so far neglected. Transnational land acquisitions are a logical outcome of globalisation and neoliberal policies resulting in processes of disembedding land from local societies. Control over land is decreasingly vested in territorially defined communities or societies, and increasingly dictated by global actors and processes, leading to a patchwork of locally disembedded land holdings responding to different translocal network logics. Global actors play an increasingly important role in reserving spaces for global goods, securing food, preserving biodiversity and mitigating climate change in widely dispersed localities. The resulting fragmentation is not conducive for inclusive and sustainable development at the local level. Findings are based on ongoing research on the consequences of transnational land acquisitions in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

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> “What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man’s institutions. To isolate it and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors”.
> (Karl Polanyi, 2001, p. 187)

The global land rush is usually framed as a problem that involves capital-rich countries and investors (e.g. from China, Japan or Gulf States, like Qatar) on the one hand and resource-rich countries on the other: driven by the food crisis and the rapidly growing demand for biofuels, foreign and domestic investors, often supported by the state, buy or lease large areas of farmland in Africa (Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania, etc.), Asia and Latin America for the production and export of food and biofuels. Others rush for commercial land in Africa or elsewhere to extract minerals, establish nature reserves, develop tourism complexes, etc.[1]

Since 2007/2008 (i.e. the start of the food crisis), many studies have been carried out, generating knowledge that is now gaining wide acceptance: large-scale acquisition of land by foreigners in developing countries takes place on a massive scale and is increasing, weather we base ourselves on World Bank sources (some 57 million ha)[2] or on the Land Matrix of the International Land Coalition and partners (some 203 million ha);[3] the land grab is undertaken not only by foreign governments and investors, but also by domestic investors; and the term "land grab" should not be used because much of what happens is legal.[4] In many African, Asian and Latin

[*] By the will of the authors, in this article the names of the authors are not in alphabetical order.

[1] An overview of different drivers of land acquisition by especially foreign investors is given in: A. Zoomers, "Globalization and the Foreignization of Space: The Seven Processes Driving the Current Global Land Grab", in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37, 2, 2010, pp. 429-447.

[2] K. Deininger, D. Byerlee, *Rising Global Interest in Farmland. Can it Yield Sustainable and Equitable Benefits?*, The World Bank, Washington D.C. 2011. This has become the work of reference for assessing the main dimensions of the land rush, especially for more official use.

[3] A similar point of reference is the report on the results of the land matrix, an extensive inventory of land deals that attempts to separate fact from fiction: W. Anseeuw, L. Alden Wily, L. Cotula, M. Tayler, *Land Rights and the Rush for Land. Findings of the Global Commercial Pressures on Land Project*, International Land Coalition, with CIRAD and IIED, Rome 2012. Available online at http://www.landcoalition.org/sites/default/files/publication/1205/ILC%20GSR%20report_ENG.pdf

[4] T. Hilhorst, J. Nelen, N. Traoré, "Agrarian change below the radar screen: Rising farmland acquisitions by domestic investors in West Africa. Results from

American countries, the state plays an active role in dispossession by offering "empty" land that in reality is occupied by local groups. It is also commonly acknowledged that large-scale land acquisition is in many cases a threat to local groups: local people are often not powerful enough to defend their rights and run the risk of displacement, which often leads to social conflicts. According to others, these large-scale investments in land have the potential to contribute to local development. Codes of conduct or guidelines ("free, prior and informed consent") are being developed in an attempt to ensure that local populations are involved in processes of consultation, and that they will benefit from such investments.[5]

This article does not present new evidence about the land rush, its drivers or the socio-economic consequences for local groups, but reveals the urgency of including in the debate a number of core problems that are currently neglected. Rather than presenting the rush for commercial land as the major problem, we discuss how neoliberal policies and globalization result in processes of disembedding land from local societies, resulting in foreignization, dispossession, enclosure and

a survey in Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger", unpublished paper, SNV, KIT, The Hague/Amsterdam. Available online: http://www.snvworld.org/sites/www.snvworld.org/files/publications/agrarian_change_under_radar_screen_kit_snv.pdf

[5] Several codes of conduct and guidelines are relevant in this respect. UNCTAD, FAO, IFAD and the World Bank have jointly identified seven Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment that Respect Rights, Livelihoods and Resources (PRAI), a "living document" endorsed for elaboration by the G20 in 2011. More recently, the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security have been formally endorsed by member states on 11 May 2012. Available online at: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/newsroom/docs/VG_en_Final_March_2012.pdf. In the field of finance, the Equator Principles offer guidance for assessing environmental and social risk for extending credit (cf. http://www.equator-principles.com/index.php/about-ep/about-ep). The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises are another source of guidance (cf. http://www.oecd.org/daf/inv/mne/). More on the role of guidelines and codes of conduct in the land grab debate can be found in Deininger, Byerlee, *Rising Global Interest* cit. and in L. Cotula, S. Vermeulen, R. Leonard and J. Keeley, *Land Grab or Development Opportunity*? *Agricultural Investment and International Land Deals in Africa*, IIED, FAO, IFAD, London/Rome 2009.

displacement. Control over land and its uses is decreasingly vested in a territorially defined community or society, and increasingly dictated by global actors and processes, resulting in a patchwork of locally disembedded pieces and parcels of land responding to different translocal network logics. Today, in addition to conventional investments (mining, agro-industries, etc.), global actors play an increasingly important role in reserving space for global goods (securing food, preserving biodiversity and mitigating climate change). This is resulting in a further fragmentation, which will lead to situations that are contrary to inclusive or sustainable development.

This article is based on ongoing research in Africa, Asia and Latin America that focuses on the consequences of land acquisition for various purposes and in various regions. The project is investigating land use change, enclosure and displacement as the consequence of the expansion of oil palm in Indonesia, soya production in Argentina and the South American Chaco, rubber and sugar in Cambodia, the consequences of farmland acquisitions by domestic investors in Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, land use change as a result of rapid urbanization in Nigeria and Vietnam, and the expansion of residential tourism in Costa Rica.[6] In addition, we provide information about a

[6] These issues are discussed in the following publications: A. Susanti, P. Burgers, "Oil Palm Expansion: Competing Claim on Lands for Food, Biofuels and Conservation", in *Sustainable Food Security in the Era of Local and Global Environmental Change,* M. Behnassi, O. Pollmann, G. Kissinger (eds), Springer, Berlin 2013. L. Goldfarb, A. Zoomers, "The Drivers Behind the Rapid Expansion of Genetically Modified Soya Production into the Chaco Region of Argentina", in *Biofuels. Economy, Environment and Sustainability*, Z. Fang (ed.), InTech, New York-Shangai-Rijeka 2013, Open access book available from: http://www.intechopen.com/books/biofuels-economy-environment-and-sustainability/the-drivers-behind-the-rapid-expansion-of-genetically-modified-soya-production-into-the-chaco-region. M. McLinden Nuijen, M. Prachvuthy, A. van Westen, "Land Grabbing in Cambodia: Land Rights in a Post-Conflict Setting", in *The Great Global Land Grab: Hype or Reality?*, M. Kaag, A. Zoomers (eds), Zed Books, London (forthcoming 2014). Hilhorst, Nelen, Traoré *Agrarian Change* cit. W. Kadiri, B. Oyalowo, "Land Alienation and Sustainability Issues in the Peri-Urban Interface of South-West Nigeria", in *Development*, 54, 1, 2011, pp. 64-69. N.Q. Phuc, A. van Westen, A. Zoomers, "Agricultural Land for Urban Development: The Process of Land Conversion in Central Vietnam", in *Habitat International*, forthcoming. Residential tourism has

number of ongoing debates that are currently hardly linked, that is, the debates on land grabbing, climate change and food security.

We first present an historical overview of the extent to which the global land rush is both a repetition of history – namely the outcome of intended policies – and something new and unexpected. We then critically review a number of key issues and make some theoretical reflections on land grabbing in relation to translocal development.

Land grabbing in historical perspective

Current discussions pay limited attention to the historical dimension, or to the fact that the current land grab is partly a repetition of history and partly a process that is contrary to what happened in previous periods.

A review of the global land rush from an historical perspective reveals similarities with colonial times, when European colonial powers took control of land overseas and made investments in their colonies. Similarly, parallels can be drawn with the era of liberalism at the turn of the 20th century, when individual investors acquired truly gigantic areas in many places across the globe. A well-known example of such a large-scale land owner is the Argentinian Carlos Casado, who in 1886 secured ownership of almost 6 million hectares in the Paraguayan Chaco. Another interesting case involved land grabbing in early colonial Rhodesia, when the British government granted a royal charter to the millionaire Cecil Rhodes that 'gave him carte blanche for 35 years to exploit large territories we now know as Zimbabwe and Zambia'.[7] Many countries had extremely

been studied by F. van Noorloos, *Whose Place in the Sun? Residential Tourism and its Consequences for Equitable and Sustainable Development in Guanacaste, Costa Rica*, PhD Study, Utrecht University, Eburon, Delft 2012. Most of these studies are carried out under the auspices of the Netherlands Academy on Land Governance for Equitable and Sustainable Development (LANDac, see www.landgovernance.org).

[7] For these historical cases of 'land grabbing' see J.M.G. Kleinpenning, *Rural Paraguay 1870-1963. A Geography of Progress, Plunder and Poverty,* Iberoamericana-Vervuert, Berlin/Madrid 2009, Vol. 1. pp. 703-712. R. Palmer, "Would Cecil Rhodes Have Signed a Code of Conduct? Reflections on Global Land Grabbing and

unequal patterns of land ownership, which were characterized by a high degree of concentration in the hands of a small minority.

In the era following decolonization, many newly created governments paid relatively little attention to land issues or to rural development in general. Industrialization by means of an import substitution strategy (ISI) was often given priority in development strategies. In the 1950s and 1960s, many developing countries concentrated their rural development efforts on encouraging the green revolution, often assisted by foreign capital, including support by the Rockefeller Foundation. This was particularly the case in Asia and Latin America.

Following this phase, several countries initiated large-scale land reform programmes aimed at combining objectives of economic growth with social concerns for a more equitable distribution of land ("land to the tiller"). Land reform often met with little success, and the number and scale of expropriations in many cases remained limited.[8] Countries that had vast reserves of under-exploited land – for example, in the Amazon basin or similar forest regions – often preferred a strategy of agrarian colonization (or transmigration in the context of Indonesia). This implied a horizontal strategy that contributed significantly to deforestation and the large-scale displacement of people, as is happening at present.[9] In these periods (roughly 1950 to the 1970s/1980s), the nation-state often assumed a crucial role in the implementation of rural development policies. Donor agencies, often Western governments and international or-

Land Rights in Africa, Past and Present". Unpublished paper for the Biennial Conference, African Studies Association of the UK, Oxford 16-19 September 2010.

[8] For extensive overviews, see P. Dorner, *Latin American Land Reforms in Theory and Practice: A Retrospective Analysis*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1992. W.C. Thiesenhusen, *Searching for Agrarian Reform in Latin America,* Unwin Hyman, New York 1989. Id., *Broken Promises: Agrarian Reform and the Latin American Campesino*, West View Press, Boulder 1995. C. Kay, "Latin Americas Agrarian Reform: Lights and Shadows", in *Land Reform - Reforme Agraire - Reforma Agraria*, 2, 1998, pp. 9-31.

[9] Kay, *Latin Americas Agrarian Reform* cit. Dorner, *Latin American Land Reforms* cit. A. Zoomers, G. van der Haar, *Current Land Policy in Latin America: Regulating Land Tenure under Neo-Liberalism*, Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), Amsterdam 2000, p. 19.

ganizations, were usually reluctant to involve themselves in issues of land ownership. This was seen as a politically sensitive issue that could easily backfire on those who touched them.

It is only since the neoliberal agenda emerged in the 1990s that issues of land governance have received more attention in policy formulation and international cooperation. Both donors and organizations like the World Bank and the FAO started to play a more active role in pursuing a neoliberal policy agenda. Along with pushing for the withdrawal of the state, they started to actively promote the liberalization of land markets and the introduction of modern land administration systems. A modern and transparent land market was considered a necessary step towards the more efficient use of land (i.e. more security), as it would stimulate people to invest in their land. Having a title to their land would provide them with collateral for obtaining credit etc.[10] Donors invested huge amounts of money in land titling programmes and in setting up cadastres, even though it gradually became clear that this would not always result in more efficient land use. Many land titling programmes failed to provide the expected benefits because they actually created insecurity among those who held unrecorded use-rights, as they did not know whether these would eventually be recognized and converted into formal titles. Land titling also resulted in extreme fragmentation of the land, as commons were subdivided among stakeholders in ways that did not encourage efficient uses. Moreover, along with neoliberalism, governments started to reduce their spending on research and technical assistance to farmers, especially for domestic food production, which had negative effects on the production environment.

In the course of the 1990s, there was some shift from pure neoliberalism towards the good governance agenda. Priority was increasingly assigned to decentralization programmes and the strengthening of local government and participatory planning, resulting in a situation whereby local governments became responsible for natural

[10] The work by Hernando de Soto is most famously associated with this approach, see H. de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else,* Basic Books, New York 2000.

resource management and/or urban governance. At the same time, governments were encouraged to create enabling business environments and to attract foreign investment, which was presented as an important component of the good governance agenda.

In the last few years, new types of policies have surfaced: as a response to the climate crisis and the food crisis, policy makers are increasingly involved in securing food supplies globally, in biodiversity conservation and in protection against climate change. All of these new policy concerns put additional pressure on land, and now against a global rather than a national background. Land, long seen as a resource to be managed by national governments, is increasingly viewed as a global good, as well as a commodity that can be acquired through the market and divested of its local linkages.

In assessing the current land rush, it is thus important to realize that it is partly a repetition or continuation of earlier processes, such as land concentration under colonialism or the expansion of mono-cropping and large-scale plantations in the 1950s. Yet part might also be the contrary to what happened in earlier periods, for example, the move away from redistributive land reforms in favour of the tillers. An assessment of the impact of the land rush in Tanzania and Paraguay, for example, shows that current large-scale land acquisitions represent a clear rupture with the earlier Ujamaa experiences in Tanzania, while being a continuation of history in the case of Paraguay (where there is a tradition of foreignization).

It is striking that in current debates, the global land rush is often presented as unexpected, prompted by the food and fuel crises, while closer scrutiny of the sequence of policy formulation shows that in many respects it represents the logical and even intended outcome of a range of policy interventions that were put in place under neoliberalism. These interventions include the liberalization of land markets, which implies the commoditization of land and water, in combination with economic development strategies that emphasize the attraction of FDI; these policies reflected the received wisdom on how to achieve economic growth as well as the good governance agenda. Whereas much emphasis was given to decentralization and participative planning, local governments were often too weak to negotiate with power-

ful, external actors, or they played an active role in attracting capital for investment. Since 2008/2009, and despite many years of decentralization (and the roll-back of the central state), national elites and global investors have rediscovered each other and helped national government – whose priorities are often not in line with the interests of local governments – to get back to business. It is striking that national governments take a lead in forging deals with foreign investors.

It is also interesting to note that the goals of the new policies aimed at food security and climate mitigation are counterproductive with respect to land grabbing: discussions about food security are often driven by such issues as how we are going to feed the 9 billion people we expect to populate our planet by 2050, frequently followed by a plea to move the frontier for food production (and large-scale farming). Increasing concerns about climate change contribute to an increasing demand for biofuels, renewable energy, REDD and reforestation, etc. International actors are claiming huge areas of land, which is going hand in hand with the intensification of the large-scale acquisition of land.[11]

In conclusion, looking at the current land grab in relation to previous periods, we can conclude that part of what is happening today is a repetition of history and part is contrary to previous policy goals, but most is the logical outcome and even intended effect of previous policies. Current processes of land grabbing are the direct outcomes of earlier neoliberal policies that were accompanied by several processes, namely the withdrawal of the state and the erosion of investment in agricultural policies; the increasing attention paid to the need to create modern and transparent land markets, resulting in the commoditization of natural resources; the emphasis on FDI as part of the good governance agenda; and the rapid process of decentralization, which in many cases has not yet resulted in strong local government.

Given the critical outcome of land grabbing and the fact that in

[11] B. Suseno, A. Susanti, A. Zoomers, "Oil Palm Plantations in Indonesia: The Implications for Migration, Settlement/Resettlement and Local Economic Development", in Z. Fang (ed.), *Biofuels. Economy, Environment and Sustainability* cit., pp. 173-193.

many places it is leading to undesired results, it is striking that no reassessment is taking place of the neoliberal principles of liberalizing land markets and/or attracting FDI, and no-one is pondering how to deal with the return of the state as a key actor in land deals. Current attempts to regulate land grabbing through codes of conduct etc. are a continuation of such policies and are thus opening the door to future investors.

Reframing the debate: what are the real problems?

The current debate tends to depict land grabbing as a relatively sudden, unexpected and crisis-related event. While it is partly a repetition of history and partly a departure from what happened before, it is mostly a logical outcome of the existing policy framework. There is little discussion about how to deal with policy inconsistencies and/or how to prevent the further commoditization of natural resources.

Several other issues are also under-represented in the current debate. One concerns the scale of the process and the speed of the developments. In the debate it is suggested that land acquisition is important especially in Africa, and that by 2010 the "grabbed" area amounted to about 45 million hectares, as quoted in an influential World Bank report of September 2010, a figure revised upward to 57 million hectares in an updated version of the same report.[12] But it is very probable that the process is much more aggressive and widespread. The Land Matrix Partnership, an ongoing research initiative by several NGOs including the International Land Coalition report that "in developing countries as many as 203 million hectares of farmland – an area the size of Western Europe – has been sold or leased since 2001, mostly to international investors".[13]

While it is notoriously difficult to arrive at reliable statistics, it is clear that transnational land acquisitions have reached impressive proportions and affect many parts of the developing world. In addition to

[12] Deininger, Byerlee, *Rising Global Interest* cit., p. 51.
[13] Anseeuw et al., *Land Rights and the Rush* cit., p. 4.

land acquisitions for the production of food and fuel, and/or mineral grabbing, there are many other drivers. For example, land is acquired for nature conservation or tourism (including residential tourism), by migrants who use their remittances to buy land in their areas of origin (usually in nearby urban centres) or also in the peri-urban sphere, and in order to provide urban infrastructure, secure urban expansion, etc.[14] There are many factors that explain why local land markets are under pressure, but urbanization (including related phenomena like special economic zones, infrastructure, etc.) is one factor that is not receiving enough attention in the current debate that wrongly presents the land rush as essentially pertaining to the rural sphere. To be sure, there is a separate body of literature on urbanization (e.g. around UN Habitat), including the associated land issues, but this urbanization debate and the land grab debate tend to take place in separate circuits, without the linkages required for a full understanding of the processes of change affecting land access.

Rather than being concerned about the iconic 57 or 203 million hectares often mentioned in relation to the acquisition of farm land in especially Africa, it is important to realize that land acquisition is taking place at a worldwide scale, and that the speed of the process is much faster than suggested in the debates. It is also important to acknowledge that particularly since 2008/2009, the pressure on land has increased as a direct consequence of new global demands for food security, as well as renewable energy (dam construction), conserving UNESCO cultural heritage, REDD and/or reforestation (as part of climate mitigation strategies). Thus, policies are often inconsistent, on the one hand promoting sustainability objectives while on the other hand undermining this by adding to the pressure on land. These global lobbies for food, climate and/or nature conservation tend to favour the creation of global enclosures, often to the detriment of local populations, especially because many local governments are too weak or corrupt to counterbalance such globalized powers.

The global land rush and new claims for land often result in rapidly rising prices. Local people, even those who receive "proper" compensa-

[14] Zoomers, *Globalization and the Foreignization of Space* cit.

tion, tend to be forced to move to more marginal areas, as buying back land in the same locality is often too expensive. In Asia, Latin America and Africa, millions of people, almost all of whom are urban dwellers, either live in delta areas and are thus vulnerable to floods and mud flows, or live in dry areas and suffer from water scarcity. Given the recently discovered vulnerability to climate change, it is more important than ever that people have sufficient manoeuvring space. However, current trends are towards further fragmentation and enclosure.

In the end, one of the major problems of our time might not be land grabbing as such, but the fact that huge numbers of people live in areas that are vulnerable or unsuitable for permanent occupation, especially in light of the need to adapt to climate change. So far, however, little or no attention has been paid to this. In addition, another problem of rising land prices might be that land becomes too expensive for governments to buy (back) in order to allocate it for social land reform (e.g. in the case of Brazil) or nature conservation (as in Costa Rica).

To the extent that attempts are made to better control current land investments, much attention is paid to the need for guidelines and/or codes of conduct for responsible investments;[15] however, surprisingly little attention is paid to such questions as how we should deal with the mosaic of islands of land that fall under different land governance regimes, each of which having its own set of conditions. This results in a type of development based on negotiation, resulting in a highly heterogeneous pattern of local situations that are often not transparent or controllable by parliaments, and are thus not in line with democratization. Another problem with guidelines is that they work mainly in those cases where foreign investors are frightened of damaging their brand names, while in reality domestic investors and/or joint ventures make up the bulk of investors. Guidelines and/or responsible investments will not solve the problem; rather, a lack of integrative plans for coordinating the different objectives and investments will generate the conditions for further fragmentation and displacement.

[15] See footnote 5 and J. Von Braun, R. Meinzen-Dick, "'Land Grabbing' by Foreign Investors in Developing Countries: Risks and Opportunities", in *IFPRI Policy Brief*, 13, 2009, Available on-line at: http://www.landcoalition.org/pdf/ifpri_land_grabbing_apr_09.pdf.

An interesting but barely debated aspect of current development is that although much attention was paid to decentralization in the recent past, central governments play important roles in land negotiations: local governments are often not strong enough to counterbalance the influence of the state, or they want to attract FDI as part of their strategy to obtain the needed funds. Since the land grab debate, central governments are back in the picture: they play a crucial role in formulating the rules and the property regimes. Local governments have only limited power in ensuring equitable and sustainable development, but in the current discussions no reflections are made on to how to deal with this. Is the hollowing out of the state by globalization reaching its limits, and is the state reasserting itself – or is it a temporary setback caused by a specific crisis, a hiccup in the course of history after which the long-term trend will resume?

Some theoretical reflections: what does it mean for development?

Rather than a specific stand-alone phenomenon to be explained in terms of the current constellation of forces (food crisis, biofuels), the land grab we are witnessing today should be seen as a logical component of the long-term evolution of capitalism or the neoliberal market economy. Recent political economy literature by authors such as Harvey on "accumulation by dispossession" offers useful insights.[16] As

[16] D. Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, Profile Books, London 2010. See also S. Sassen, "A Savage Sorting of Winners and Losers: Contemporary Versions of Primitive Accumulation", in *Globalizations*, 7, 1-2, 2011, pp. 23-50. The Journal of Peasant Studies has issued two special issues on 'land grabbing' with a strong political economy focus in recent years, see S. Borras, R. Hall, I. Scoones, B. White, W. Wolford, "Towards an Better Understanding of Global Land Grabbing", in *The Journal of Peasant Studies,* 38, 2, 2011, pp. 209-216 and other contributions to that issue. Also B. White, S. Borras, R. Hall, I. Scoones, W. Wolford, "The New Enclosures: Critical Perspectives on Corporate Land Deals", in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39, 3-4, pp. 619-647, and further articles in the same (double) issue. More can be found in a special issue "Land Grabbing and Global Governance", in *Globalizations*, 10, 1, 2013, pp. 1-209.

earlier outlined by Polanyi,[17] the rise of the market economy entailed the disembedding of economic life from society as a whole, by creating separate institutions for economic and for socio-cultural processes. While self-regulating markets may work for commodities, they create problems when labour and nature, which includes land, are brought under the same market discipline. Land, according to Polanyi, is a fictitious commodity, as it cannot be produced in line with market conditions nor can it effectively be separated from nature and society, both of which are characteristics that define real commodities. As a result, free markets for land and labour can only function with strong regulatory intervention, both to enforce the artificial separation (disembedding) of land from other components of nature and society with which it is intrinsically linked, and to mitigate the potentially disastrous consequences of this disembedding for people and nature.

In line with Polanyi's ideas, the current land grab can be interpreted as a logical next step in the development of disembedded markets for fictitious commodities, one initiated by the current phase of globalization that is specifically aiming at the removal of obstacles to market forces that are embodied in the territorial nation state. This explains both the current transnational land grabs and the resultant dislocation of local communities, as well as the renewed and paradoxical role of the central state as an active agent in facilitating this liberalization of land markets. In Polanyi's famous dictum, "laissez fare was planned; planning was not", that is, the commoditization of land (and labour) can be imposed only by intervention. In most cases, this requires more than decentralized authorities can muster. Breaking up the nation state as a container for economic life can only be done by states themselves.

Looking at what is currently happening around the world, the grabbing of farmland is only one component of much more important processes, which include the disembedding of land from its social and natural environments, leading to the foreignization of land that until recently was contained in national frameworks. It further entails the creation of elite spaces and global enclosures, which often

[17] K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Beacon Press, Boston 2001 (Originally published 1944).

means the fragmentation, dispossession and/or dislocation of the local population and/or the imposition of foreign social structures. In this endeavour, national elites and global investors often join forces, but this is not necessarily in line with what local governments and populations want – not to mention problems of accountability.

One of the most striking observations is that the current debate on land grabbing – as well as several parallel debates about climate change, biodiversity and food security – does not pay much attention to the implications of these issues for development. To the extent that development is taken into consideration, there tends to be a strong focus on the position of the local population, but in general terms and in complete isolation from the poverty alleviation debate, which is very much framed in terms of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is most peculiar that these issues, which are intimately interwoven, are by and large discussed in separate debates, thus to a large extent ignoring what happens on the other side of the fence. New themes such as land grabbing, food security, biodiversity, nature conservation, climate mitigation and adaptation (including climate-sound agriculture) and migration cannot be isolated from the debate on poverty and development, and vice versa.

Acknowledging that the land grab is closely connected to neoliberalism and globalization, we should also venture to rethink our notion of "development" when discussing the human consequences of large-scale land acquisitions. Development is usually framed, also when discussed in connection to land grabbing, in terms of local characteristics: how much is invested locally, how many jobs are created locally, how much food is produced locally, and the facilities, services and infrastructure that have been installed locally. While these are all relevant features, the implicit assumption is that local impact and local development are a function of these supplied resources, while local demand is not. The dominant sedentary concept of development, whereby there is a local population that can be isolated from others, is not realistic. The increasing role of global actors and the emergence of new mobilities,[18] including multilocal

[18] For an outline of the "new mobilities" approach, see M. Sheller, M.J. Urry,

livelihoods, means that more traditional conceptualizations are losing some of their validity.

Today, people often form part of networks, and while many people are permanent residents, many will also maintain important links with other places. They might be locally based for a couple of months and spend some of their time elsewhere, or they might have functional links with other places through family connections. Multilocal livelihoods, in which people make a living by combining opportunities presented by different activities in more than one locality, have become much more widespread as a result of the increasing ease of travel. Although this might help to mitigate the negative effect of displacement due to land acquisitions by outsiders, it might equally imply that losses and dispossessions are not limited to the strictly local population. The analysis of the local impact of land grabbing, and of development interventions more generally, often insufficiently acknowledges that as soon as positive changes take place (i.e. investments in new activities), new immigration flows will lead to the bypassing of part of the population that is established locally. For instance, in a study of new rubber plantations in northeastern Cambodia, 61% of newly created jobs were taken by recent immigrants, and not by locals; similar trends can be seen in Indonesia, where the producers of palm oil in Riau originate from Java.[19]

In a globalizing world, development and poverty alleviation can no longer be effectively analysed within local territorial containers. Translocal connections play an important role, both on the side of causes of change (external investment, origin of land grabs) and on the side

"The New Mobilities Paradigm", in *Environment and Planning*, 38, 2006, pp. 207-226. For impact on livelihoods, see L. de Haan, A. Zoomers, "Exploring the Frontier of Livelihood Research", in *Development and Change*, 36, 1, 2005, pp. 27-47.

[19] The Cambodian case is by M. Prachvuthy, *Land Acquisitions by Non-Local Actors and Consequences for Local Development: Impacts of Economic Land Concessions on the Livelihoods of Indigenous Communities in Northeastern Provinces of Cambodia*, Royal University of Phnom Penh/LANDac, Phnom Penh/Utrecht 2011. Available on-line at http://www.landgovernance.org/system/files/Cambodia_landacquisition_impacts_indigenouspeople.pdf. The Indonesian oil palm case is from Suseno, Susanti, Zoomers, *Oil Palm Plantations in Indonesia* cit.

of local impact and response. The translocal nature of the changes is even more in evidence when we consider what happens when people receive compensation for having to give up their land to external investors. In the first place, "fair" compensation is usually not enough to enable them to reconstruct their livelihoods by acquiring a similar quantity of similar quality land anywhere near their original homes. The arrival of non-local players and the subsequent subjugation to world market prices tends to exert upward pressure on land prices in such a way that it is not possible to replace land that has been lost. But even if displaced farmers succeed in buying replacement fields, this will likely result in the displacement of others, since free suitable land has become a rarity in most places around the globe. Thus, the first land grab produces a ripple effect, a chain of acquisitions and displacements, and the stronger (i.e. richer) actors will tend to crowd out the weaker (i.e. poorer) ones. Territorially contained local analysis of developmental impacts will overlook such processes.[20]

In policy debates on ensuring that local people benefit from externally induced changes, codes of conduct (or "principles" or "guidelines" for responsible investment) are mentioned as a good approach that is in line with a market-friendly orientation. However, we should ask ourselves whether this is a feasible option, or something that will lead to a mosaic of development on the basis of negotiation. The credentials and feasibility of responsible investment and codes of conduct are questionable. It may be assumed that the most aggressive forces of land grabbing will not be limited by principles of free, prior and informed consent, as the most pernicious land grabs often do not involve foreign investors, or they use complex alliances with domestic interests, which makes them difficult to detect. Such unscrupulous actors will not be bound by voluntary guidelines. Even if they were, the outcome would be a highly fragmented situation resulting from case-by-case negotiations reflecting different power geometries.

[20] For the translocal dimension of local development see A. Zoomers, A. van Westen, "Translocal Development, Development Corridors and Development Chains", Special Issue, in *International Development Planning Review,* 33, 4, 2011, pp. 377-88. The same issue contains several case studies detailing different dimensions of translocal development.

To the extent that firms are willing to make responsible investments, this is often in the form of conventional development projects (employment, schools, etc.). It is rather cynical that after so many attempts to halt piecemeal and gap-filling activities, old-fashioned development projects reappear in the context of responsible investment. Another problem is that most FDI agreements are secret, and parliaments and public opinion are not able to control what happens on the ground. Finally, the dominant idea that fair compensation is an answer to land grabbing is, in this sense, unrealistic, not only because it is a continuation of neoliberal policies and has adverse outcomes, but also because compensation does not mean much in a context where people lack alternatives and use their land as a safety valve.

Given the current patterns of land grabbing, it is important to acknowledge that what is currently happening in the world will have important implications for global power relations. First, we see the importance of new, Southern actors: countries like the Gulf States, Brazil, Mauritius, China and India are becoming major actors in new regions. Brazil, for instance, is increasing its investments in Mozambique, in close coordination with China and South Africa. This is accompanied by the appearance of new dichotomies and sometimes ambivalent situations, in which different agendas play a role alongside each other. In countries such as Brazil, South Africa and China, governments are allocating land in order to achieve more equitable conditions for their own populations (land reform), while at a world scale they are playing a role as land grabbers. To the extent that both global and domestic policies are pursued by the same public sector actors, these are truly schizophrenic policy agendas. At the same time, Western countries, while promoting the achievement of the MDGs, are pushing for land for global goods (climate change) as well as codes of conduct as a strategy against land grabbing. They may amount to much the same thing for land users locally, but different processes are at play in creating pressure on land.

Moreover, to the extent that countries or investors make investments in distant places, this might create new corridors. The presence of the Chinese in Africa, for instance, is not limited to the purchase or leasing of land; other relations emerge, such as the in-

flow of a labour force, new trade links, etc. It is already clear that the Chinese diaspora plays an important role in channelling investments to different localities. With respect to the current trends of land grabbing, it is important not only to look at the short-term effects and the new flows of investment, but also to take a longer-term perspective by considering how initial investments in land might slowly materialize along such corridors of development, which are not yet visible. However, what we perceive today – namely globalization contributing to the fragmentation of space, and peoples' need to have sufficient manoeuvring space in order to be able to adapt to climate change – raises concern. It is not only about a global land rush: it is about the rapidly increasing pressure on local land, and the fact that large parts of the planet's population live in dangerous and vulnerable places without having alternatives. The current discussion about land grab is not broad or deep enough, and current policies are not compatible with these larger issues.

Final reflections

Thus, the problem is not land grabbing, but the underlying forces (the commoditization of nature) and the rapidly expanding use of land for global goods. Land grabbing is wrongly depicted as a relatively sudden, unexpected and crisis-related event, that is, as the outcome of the food crisis in tandem with the growing demand for biofuels, which suddenly appeared around 2008. While it is partly a repetition of history and partly a departure from previous trends, it is mostly a logical outcome of policies that have been implemented since the 1990s. It is in many respects a repetition of what happened in earlier times, and partly contrary to (or going hand in hand with) redistributive land reforms. It is fundamentally a logical continuation of secular trends in the evolution of the capitalist economy, expanding markets by adding new commodities and agents to their domain. In the case of nature being turned into a commodity, as outlined by Polanyi, this necessitates the severing of ties between the commoditized part (land) and the social and ecological links to which it is intrinsically linked.

There has so far been no attempt to halt and change this process:

policies and discussions (such as the win-win discourse) are very much inspired by neoliberalism and there is no sign that this will change. And to the extent that attention is paid to the consequences, the emphasis has been on how to protect the local population and/or how to control the investors. There has not been a fundamental debate about what large-scale land acquisitions mean to development.

Given that large-scale land acquisition is a result of globalization and that no fundamental changes are taking place in the underlying forces or policies, we do not expect the situation to change. As a result, policy inconsistencies will likely increase. Foreign direct investments and free mobility form part of current development paradigms, but the continued focus on local populations in development interventions shows the persistence of a sedentary approach to development. At the same time, while the growing climate variability makes it more important than ever that people live in safe places, translating large tracts of land into private estates (elite space) has negative implications for people's ability to adapt to climate change. Rather than focusing on codes of conduct, more attention should be paid to land use planning that effectively reconciles the conflicting claims on land. The time has arrived to acknowledge that central and local governments, in concert with other stakeholders, have important roles to play in setting the rules for inclusive and sustainable development.

Priority should also be given to streamlining policy efforts and merging debates about poverty alleviation, climate change, food security and biodiversity conservation. Each of these debates heads in a different direction, ignoring other concerns and thereby producing competing claims and aggravating land grabbing. Large-scale food production, nature conservation and the kind of measures taken by Europe and the USA (biofuels, REDD, renewable energy) will indirectly put pressure on land markets. Although some areas will be deforested, others will be afforested (i.e. in the case of REDD). Whereas in the current debate much attention is paid to land grabbing, it is important to realize that other resources – such as water or minerals – are simultaneously at stake.

A discussion about pure land rights in isolation of these other concerns will therefore not do. What we need is a more fundamental

discussion about how to deal with the causes of disembedding and what it means for development. We need to look at how we can deal with the further commoditization of nature, how we can ensure the sustainable and productive use of land while guaranteeing inclusive development, and protecting the rights of existing users. Much will depend on the role of central and local governments and the strength of civil society. As Karl Polanyi[21] wrote: "What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man's institutions. To isolate it and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors".

[21] Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* cit., p. 187.