

Governing global land deals: The role of the state in the rush for land

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Abstract

Over the past decade, there has been a dramatic increase in large-scale land deals, often from public lands to the hands of foreign or domestic investors. Popularly referred to as a 'global land grab', new land acquisitions are drawing upon, restructuring and challenging the nature of both governance and government. In the Introduction to this special issue, we argue for an analysis of land deals that draws upon the insights of political ecology, cultural politics and agrarian studies to illuminate the micro-processes of transaction and expropriation as well as the broader structural forces at play. We argue that 'the state' is often invoked as a key player in land grabbing but states never operate with one voice; rather we need to unbundle the state, to see government and governance as processes, people and relationships. To develop this approach, we focus on territory, sovereignty, authority and subjects not as static objects but as relationships produced in and through place, property, power and production. Understanding the dynamic nature of these relationships is critical to understanding the highly variable form and content of large-scale land deals in different settings around the world. The papers in this special issue help to develop this perspective and this Introduction highlights important areas of convergence among them.

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a dramatic increase in large-scale land acquisitions for the purposes of securing access to the means of producing natural resource commodities (see Borras et al., 2011; Deininger et al., 2011; de Schutter, 2011). In just one year, from March 2008 to April 2009, an estimated 40 million hectares of land changed hands; the latest figures from the World Bank suggest that this was twenty times higher than the average annual level of land transfers for the preceding forty years (Arezki et al., 2011: 1).¹ The motives and the means differ, but transnational and domestic interests have acquired increasing quantities of land throughout the global South for a wide range of purposes, including logging, food, fuel and increasingly bio-fuel production, tropical forest products and plantation forestry, ranching, production of illegal narcotics, access to water or hydropower, precious minerals and metals, oil, natural gas, carbon sinks and protection of flora and fauna and global biodiversity (Zoomers, 2010). While many

¹ Original estimates from the World Bank suggested that there was only a tenfold increase in land acquisitions (Deininger et al., 2011: vi) while estimates produced by the International Land Coalition (ILC) and Oxfam are significantly higher. The ILC has documented transfers of 80 million hectares from 2008 to 2011, while Oxfam suggests that more than 227 million hectares have been allocated in large-scale land deals since 2001, with the vast majority of those transfers occurring after 2008. See the ILC/CIRAD forthcoming synthesis report on the Commercial Pressures on Land Research Project cited in Oxfam (2011).

- White, B., S.M. Borras Jr., R. Hall, I. Scoones and W. Wolford (2012) 'The New Enclosures: Critical Perspectives on Corporate Land Deals', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39(3-4): 619-47 (Special Issue).
- Wolford, W. (2008) 'Environmental Justice and the Construction of Scale in Brazilian Agriculture', *Society & Natural Resources* 21(7): 641-55.
- Zoomers, A. (2010) 'Globalisation and the Foreignisation of Space: Seven Processes Driving the Current Global Land Grab', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37(2): 429-47.