

EFFECTIVE ACTIONS AGAINST LAND GRABBING

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Jeremy Bourgoin*



SCIENCE FOR ACTION



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EFFECTIVE ACTIONS AGAINST LAND GRABBING

The Science for Action Series is jointly coordinated by the International Land Coalition (ILC) and the Global Land Programme (GLP). It brings together key findings from research networks relevant to ILC'S ten commitments to People-Centred Land Governance. The Series facilitates exchange of knowledge between scientists, civil society and grassroots organisations to strengthen efforts of land users, practitioners and policy-makers and bring about positive change in land governance.

This brief refers to Commitment Nine: 'Prevent and remedy land grabbing, respecting traditional land use rights and local livelihoods, and ensuring that all large-scale initiatives that involve the use of land, water, and other natural resources comply with human rights and environmental obligations.' Where adverse impacts on human rights and legitimate tenure rights have occurred, concerned actors should provide for, and cooperate in, impartial and competent mechanisms to provide remedy, including through land restitution and compensation.'

It is based on the research of the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), the French agricultural research and cooperation organisation (CIRAD), the Institute of Geography University of Bern (GIUB) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

Recognising the need to take action against unequal and unsustainable land and resource exploitation, the ILC and the GLP commit to taking effective action against land grabbing. Together with partners and members from the Land Matrix Initiative (CDE, GIGA, CIRAD) and other institutions such as GIUB and IIED, ILC and GLP commit to support local communities to ensure that all large-scale land transactions that involve the use of land, water and other natural resources attend to human rights and environmental obligations.

DEFINING LAND GRABBING

Land grabbing refers to the contentious issue of large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) by domestic and transnational companies, governments, or individuals. These transactions, often involving the purchase or lease of vast areas of land, typically occur in low- or middle-income countries and are primarily intended for agricultural, mining, forestry, or industrial purposes. While the term 'large-scale land acquisition' is more neutral, 'land grabbing' suggests exploitative practices such as lack of consent, inadequate compensation, rights violations, or harmful environmental impacts. Land grabbing has affected over 33 million hectares globally, largely for agriculture and transnational investments, with a focus on low-

and middle-income countries.^{1,2,3,4} The practice raises significant cause for concerns due to its adverse impact on the environment, local livelihoods and customary land rights.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Recent analysis of Land Matrix data reveals a notable increase in LSLAs following the 2007-08 commodity price surge, when investors moved quickly to secure land globally. This trend continues with new land investments emerging in areas such as wind parks, solar farms, biofuels, and nature-based carbon-offsetting projects. These investments are being driven by the rise in popularity of climate change mitigation policies

and practices, such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD and REDD+) activities.⁴

'GREEN' ENERGY INVESTMENT

The surge of 'green investments' is also fueling an ever-rising demand for mining goods and transition minerals, reflecting a shift in narrative towards global energy sector transformation from fossil-based to zero-carbon green energy.⁵

Compared to traditional technologies like hydro, fossil and nuclear, renewable energy technologies require a greater and more diversified quantity of minerals to build the required infrastructure to meet global demand. Under the Net Zero Emissions by 2050 scenario (NZE), key critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper and neodymium are expected to see demand increase by 1.5 to 7 times by 2030. The International Energy Agency (IEA) further stresses that "mining capacity for critical minerals needs to expand swiftly to get on track with net zero goals," further driving investments in the mining industry.⁶

IMPACTS ON PEOPLE AND ECOSYSTEMS

Despite the promises of economic benefits and green-technology advancements associated with LSLAs, the past decade has witnessed growing concern among scholars and practitioners regarding their human rights and environmental impacts.⁷ Evidence points to a range of issues, from threatened ecosystems to the displacement or eviction of local populations.^{8,9}

The new land rush, driven by the push for a green energy transition, poses a particular threat to indigenous communities, who are already highly vulnerable to environmental injustices. This vulnerability is often exacerbated by the lack of recognition of their legitimate land rights.¹⁰ These dynamics are a breeding ground for socio-environmental conflicts.⁶

SELECTIVE NEGATIVE IMPACTS

LSLAs often have profound impacts on local communities, particularly by limiting access to essential livelihood resources through enclosure of their assets. In Vietnam, for instance, the expansion of vast rubber plantations is heavily backed by a government intent on industrialisation and modernisation. However,



these large-scale efforts often endanger the livelihoods of small-scale farmers. Large scale land acquisitions thus enable:

- Elite actors and international actors to exert greater influence over policy, marginalising local voices in decision-making processes
- Widening inequalities in the distribution of benefits derived from land use
- Polarisation of development narratives
- Erosion of community cohesion, fostering uncertainty within communities^{1,3}

FACING CHALLENGES

Although land grabbing negatively impacts individuals and communities, rectifying the practice involves several challenges. Many countries do not recognise customary and communal land rights within their national legal frameworks, making it difficult for communities to claim ownership or protection. Furthermore, land deals are most often characterised by significant power imbalances and lack of transparency. At the local and regional levels, there is frequently limited, weak political and collective action capacity to address issues of sustainability and territorial planning.¹¹

The majority of LSLAs are also driven by profit-oriented businesses that are sustained by a widespread belief that industrial agriculture and land exploitation can solve unemployment and drive economic growth. As a result, these investments fail to invest sufficiently in socially- and environmentally-sound practices. Additionally, fluctuations in commodity prices tend to redirect investment focus towards existing projects, further complicating efforts to prioritise sustainable and equitable land use.¹² ▶

FINDING SOLUTIONS

Addressing the challenges posed by land grabbing requires more than just reforming legal frameworks governing LSLAs. Solutions must also directly tackle the impacts on land rights of communities and individuals affected by these acquisitions.

A daunting future is not guaranteed; since the land rush of the late 2000s, there has been a noticeable slowdown of land investments thanks to a range of effective actions already in place. Data from the Land Matrix shows a decline in new land investments after 2010. Since 2013, only about 3 million hectares have been added to the database, compared to the 33 million hectares recorded in 1,865 deals by 2020 (of which 1,560 deals with 30 million hectares were concluded).



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POLICIES AT DIFFERENT SCALES

International frameworks and guidelines introduced after the 2008-09 land rush have exerted significant pressure on large-scale initiatives to operate within established human rights and environmental obligations. These instruments, designed to protect the rights of peasant communities and enhance transparency, include the UN declaration on the Rights of Peasants and the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGTs). These frameworks offer civil society organisations (CSOs) a solid foundation to build alliances and nurture widespread change.

Analysis from the Land Matrix shows that, at both country and deal levels, the implementation of the VGGTs and associated principles remains low. To enhance their implementation, two key recommendations are emphasised:

- **Land- and agricultural-related financial support or investments should require implementation** of and follow-up on the VGGTs.
- **Policy design should incorporate national and local multi-stakeholder engagement platforms** to ensure compliance and effective implementation.

Achieving global-scale legal empowerment of communities and individuals requires stronger connections to local actions that promote citizen

EMPOWERMENT FOR LOCAL ACTION

GRASSROOTS ACTION

Land grabbing disproportionately affects peasant and indigenous women, who face dual exclusion from land governance – first due to patriarchal norms, and second due to neoliberal policies favouring market mechanisms and individual property rights.¹⁸ The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), in partnership with the Tanzania Womens' Lawyers Association (TAWLA), works to amplify women's voices in local land governance areas impacted by land grabbing. By providing technical support, they have helped villages develop gender-sensitive bylaws, increasing women's participation in decision-making.

TAWLA's approach includes women, youth, elders and disabled people to ensure equitable representation of minority groups. Their successful pilot in six villages in Kisware led local authorities to request TAWLA's assistance in facilitating the adoption of these bylaws across the remaining 65 villages in the district.¹⁹ The IIED has expanded similar partnerships in Senegal, Malawi, and Cameroon, focusing on reengineering local and national governance in response to land grabbing.



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involvement in land and resource governance. These efforts are essential to mitigating the negative impacts of LSLAs.^{12,13} At every stage of reviewing land and resource governance, it is critical to ensure equitable stakeholder representation. This approach will better ensure that fair policies can be developed which consider the human rights of local individuals

- **Promoting land reform** to secure the rights of farmers and peasants to access land and natural resources.
- **Supporting collective action** towards institutional changes that value human labour and develop fair value supply chains.^{11,15}

Collective action can also be an effective strategy

By raising awareness among local communities about their land and resource rights, CSOs can help support these groups to have a meaningful voice in decision-making processes.

and communities, as well as the possible benefits that might be derived from optimising land and resource usage while minimising negative impacts.¹³

PEOPLE-CENTRED LAND GOVERNANCE

CSOs' key role lies in supporting traditional land users at the communal and municipal levels, as the foundation for the development of sustainable food systems. Key advocacy areas include:

- **Ensuring local land users have equal opportunities** and representation, especially in the development of instruments and actions that address risks and impacts of adapting to global environmental changes.¹⁴

for preventing LSLAs in the first place. For example, in Son La, Northwest Vietnam, villagers successfully resisted proposed LSLAs through organised efforts to protect their land rights.¹⁶

EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS

Supporting the most under-represented and vulnerable groups (such as indigenous peoples, women, youth, migrants and landless workers) and ensuring their participation in discussions and decision-making is a crucial way in which CSOs can help redress the imbalances of power generated through LSLAs.^{3,17} By raising awareness among local communities about their land and resource rights, CSOs can help support these groups to have a meaningful voice in decision-making processes. ▶

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Finally, a key priority moving forward is securing representation for local individuals and groups in land deal negotiations. Ensuring that local stakeholders are actively involved in decision-making, even when LSLAs are already in place, can improve outcomes for communities. This is particularly important for protecting workers' rights and holding land acquisitions accountable to international guidelines.

EFFECTIVE LEGAL TOOLS

CSOs can leverage legal empowerment at the local level to better address the impacts of LSLAs. Partnering with organisations that possess the legal expertise and technical knowledge of national and international law enables CSOs to help communities affected by land and resource-based investments. This also helps align legal frameworks with the priorities of local groups. Many laws offer weak protection for land and resource rights, but with a clear understanding of the legal system and creative thinking, it is possible not only to push the boundaries of existing law, but also to support individuals and communities to become part of the law reform process.²

Transparency about proposed land deals can mobilise local, regional and national public pressure, encouraging more responsible business practices and reforms.²⁰ This transparency is critical to enhancing accountability, ensuring respect for legal frameworks and traditional land

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In areas targeted for LSLAs, it is essential to strengthen protections for the sustainable livelihoods of nearby individuals and communities. Where deals have been finalised, CSOs can exert pressure on investors and government agencies to adopt inclusive business practices that yield more sustainable economic and environmental benefits for affected communities. In regions where LSLAs are proposed, CSOs can work to secure land rights for local communities and advocate for a reduction in the size and impact of the land deals.

LEGAL TOOLS FOR CITIZEN EMPOWERMENT

IIED's Legal Tools for Citizen Empowerment programme aims to support small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples and other communities in enforcing their rights and having a voice in decision-making processes on natural resource investments. The programme focuses on three key areas:

- Providing analysis, insight and learning to inform grassroots advocacy efforts
- Applying a strategic local-to-global perspective that links processes across scales
- Implementing a tailored, locally-led approach that supports local partners and communities

As a part of this initiative, IIED completed a three-year collaborative research project focused on improving accountability in land and investment processes in Senegal, Ghana and Cameroon. The project supported community action in advocacy activities to increase local control over land and resource governance. Key lessons learned include:²²

- Ensuring that communities lead the actions taken
- Understanding both limitations and opportunities within legal systems
- Addressing political factors to further legal empowerment and renegotiate power imbalances

These insights were derived from participatory assessments of the limits and opportunities of legal frameworks relating to agricultural investments, and of new tools that were developed to improve accountability. Given the continued wave of large-scale land acquisitions, it is critical to innovate accountability mechanisms and ensure that investments reflect local needs and priorities.

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rights and aligning decision-making processes with local priorities.²⁰

Addressing entrenched power imbalances and land rights gaps also require understanding the interwoven political and economic dynamics at play. Identifying entry points for maximum impact

is essential, as is confronting vested interests within and outside communities.^{12,21} Legal empowerment is most effective when combined with public mobilisation and collective action, and becomes a more powerful tool when part of a comprehensive strategy, such as community advocacy on agribusiness investments.²¹ ●

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For a full list of references please refer to the Annex - [End Notes](#)

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