



Essay

Land grabbing in Mexico: extent, scale, purpose and novelty

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Abstract:

The expression "land grabbing" has been used to describe large scale land transactions in developing nations; buyers or contractors usually are governments or companies of industrialized nations. This paper addresses the extension, scale, purpose and novelty of land grabbing, as well as two major debates around this issue: the contribution of land transactions (if any) to rural development; the role of rural actors in the process. The paper focuses on Latin America and the Caribbean, with particular emphasis on Mexico. Land grabbing in the region involves not only the production of "flex crops", but also "commodity grabs" and "green grabs". Mexico presents a very high concentration and foreignization of the agricultural chain value, which is expressed in various forms of contract agriculture. Current processes of land grabbing are different from others occurring in the past because they are a new way to respond to the multiple dimensions of the global crisis: financial, food, energy and climate. The paper concludes that more research is

needed on the impacts of land grabbing on rural communities, particularly from a differentiated and comparative approach capable of highlighting regional, class, age, and gender disparities.

Key words: Contract agriculture, biofuel, class, age, gender, land deals.

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Introduction

The expression "land grabbing" has been used to describe large scale, transnational land transactions. Daley (2011) defines it as the process through which market pressures make "poorer holders of legal/formal rights to land sell or lease their land to people who are generally wealthier than them, enabling the concentration of land ownership and rights into the hands of those few with the resources to invest in land development on a larger scale". Although some transactions are illegal, most land is acquired or rented legally. The phenomenon became more visible during the financial crisis of 2007-2008, when land grabs increased in order to produce the agricultural commodities (food and biofuel) needed in developed countries (Behrman *et al.*, 2012).

This topic has been subject to intensive debate. Some scholars see land grabs as a major threat to rural livelihoods because they embody capital's drive to control land through coercive means. The implications of the shift from subsistence farming into extraction are population displacement, lack of access to natural resources and the loss of food security among the rural poor (Borras *et al.*, 2011).

On the other hand, institutions like the World Bank (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011) use more neutral expressions (*i.e.*, land deals or transactions) in order to describe what they consider to be an economic opportunity for the rural poor, provided that land governance is regulated by a series of principles involving food security, good governance, social participation, environmental sustainability and respect for land and resources rights.

This paper draws on the most relevant literature published on land grabbing throughout a decade in order to reach two objectives. The first one is to briefly describe the land grabbing phenomenon in terms of extension, scale, purpose and novelty. The second is to outline the major debates around land grabbing—mostly, whether or not it has development potential for the rural poor; and the role of rural communities in the process. The paper focuses on Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), with particular emphasis on Mexico to the benefit of scholars working on the region who are not familiar with this issue.

Land grabbing: extension, scale, purpose and novelty

The extent of land grabbing remains unclear. The government of Germany refers to 22 million hectares of agricultural land already sold, leased or in negotiation (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009). The International Food Policy Research Institute estimates roughly 20 million hectares sold or leased during the period of 2005-2009, while the World Bank reports 45 million hectares (Borras *et al.*, 2011). The International Land Coalition (ILC) and OXFAM register much larger figures (80 million and 227 million hectares, respectively) (Borras *et al.*, 2012). The differences in numbers can be attributed to the sources used in each report. Media accounts do not necessarily explain whether land deals have been finalized, while inventories prepared by government agencies include only the deals that have been approved by them. Whatever it may be, both

media reports and national inventories agree on the fact that land grabbing is a growing phenomenon (Cotula, 2012).

The scale of measurement has also been central to the debate. Institutions such as FAO, the World Bank and Oxfam consider 1 000 hectares as the benchmark to define large-scale land acquisitions, while the indicator used by the Land Matrix Partnership is 200 hectares or more, arguing that moderate figures allow to account for the grabbing of family farms whose average size in Germany is 45 hectares (Forschungs- und Dokumentationszentrum Chile-Lateinamerika, 2014). Borras *et al.* (2012) shift their focus from the amount of hectares involved to the sum of money being at stake, in order to render visible the operation of capital: "300 ha of high-value vineyard; 500 ha of rare metal mining concession; 100 000 ha of land for industrial tree plantation, and 500 000 ha of grazing land for livestock may in fact have comparable scale in capital, despite the huge discrepancies in physical land requirement among them".

The source of capital for land grabbing is diverse. Originally, attention focused on countries from the Gulf (Bahrain, Libya, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia) and East Asia (China, South Korea and Japan) with limited land and water resources to meet their own food and energy needs (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009). 90% of the land deals conducted in Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar and Mali involve transnational agribusiness companies (Cotula, 2012), often in collusion with national elites (Verma, 2014). Regional investment patterns have also been identified, for example Chinese capital predominates in Laos and Cambodia; South African capital in the Republic of Congo; Libyan capital in Liberia and Mali. Where cross-regional foreign investment is involved, evidence points to Europe and North America as key regions of capital origin (Cotula, 2012).

Needless to say, countries in the global South have a long history of land dispossession rooted in centuries of colonial domination. What is distinct between current land grabs from others occurring in the past is the convergence of multiple crises: financial, food, energy/fuel and climate change. The increase of investment in "flex crops" (oil palm, sugar cane, soya) is a clear expression of this; the same product can be used as food,

biofuel or industrial material, upon request. Grabs may also involve various forms of land control (purchase, lease, contract agriculture, forest conservation) aimed at addressing climate change concerns, for example carbon sequestration and clean energy generation (wind farms) (Borras *et al.*, 2012).

Flex crops have become an important source of investment in the global South due to their triple use (Doss *et al.*, 2014). In fact, two-thirds of the global land under lease for food and biofuel production concentrate in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Sudan, Ethiopia, Madagascar and Mozambique as the most important investment recipients (Behrman *et al.*, 2012). Other authors also mention Angola, Indonesia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Zambia and Tanzania (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009). Outside Africa, Cambodia, Laos, Philippines, Indonesia, Ukraine, Russia, Argentina and Brazil also are significant recipient countries (Cotula, 2012). In LAC, flex crop production was promoted since the 1990's by governments which, in spite of their leftist orientation, pushed for a development model based on the exploitation of raw materials and natural resources (Costantino, 2014). Land grabbing for flex crops has been documented in Brazil, Guatemala (Action Aid International, 2008) and Peru (Tejada and Rist, 2017).

"Green grabbing" for the purpose of conservation, tourism and carbon sequestration has been identified in Guatemala, Colombia and Mexico (Osborne, 2011; Ojeda, 2012, 2013; Rocheleau, 2015; Devine, 2016). It is usually portrayed as an environment and community-friendly alternative because it does not involve the whole alienation of land. However, it often leads to changing patterns of resource management which are experienced by locals as land dispossession and enclosure (Fairhead *et al.*, 2012; Devine, 2016).



Land acquisitions: a development tool for the rural poor?

The World Bank (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011) states that land transactions can offer benefits to the communities receiving investment if they are regulated by seven principles involving food security, good governance, social participation, environmental sustainability and respect for land and resources rights. Critics argue that the World Bank provides little indication as to how these voluntary principles can actually work (Borras *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, the World Bank report contains very little information on the type of contracts involved, in spite of its privileged access to government data. In other words, there is “a huge disconnect between what the World Bank says, what is happening on the ground and what is truly needed” (GRAIN, 2010).

The negative impacts of land grabbing documented throughout the world include population displacement, lack of access to water and other natural resources, and the loss of food security and livelihoods. New jobs are usually low waged or seasonal, and they are available to very few people (Rocheleau, 2015). Land grabs may also involve violent conflict and division within communities. If consultations take place, the information provided is very limited and the commitments adopted by investors are vague and not necessarily related to local needs (Chu, 2011; Behrman *et al.*, 2012). Even the United Nations (through its Committee on Food Security) has stated that there is no real evidence of win-win scenarios benefitting the poor in land grabs (Mehta *et al.*, 2012). In fact, the safeguards put into place for the benefit of local populations have resulted not from the good intentions of investors, but rather from social organization and mobilization (Li, 2011).

Nation states have a central role in making land and natural resources available to private operators since they classify, quantify and reallocate land for investment (Cotula, 2012). Land deals are carried out on behalf of investors using varying degrees of coercion, thus making capital accumulation and political legitimation beneficial only to privileged groups (Borras *et al.*, 2012). It comes as no surprise

that land grabs occur in countries with poor governance records and/or with a deeply embedded structural dependency. In such a context, investments do not bring about sustainable or equitable development, but rather the deepening of social inequalities and environmental degradation (Costantino, 2014).

For most authors, land grabs are not really about promoting rural development, but rather about providing food, energy and conservation for wealthy countries at the expense of the poor people living in poor countries (Behrman *et al.*, 2012). The destruction of livelihoods and the appropriation of resources operate to the benefit of privileged groups, and are legitimated in the name of progress. Ince (2014) finds it ironic that “primitive accumulation, which was initially wielded by colonial powers and then by postcolonial states against the former colonists, once again locks hands with global capital in the name of ‘development’”.

Based on this discussion, Borrás *et al.* (2012) suggest to replace the term “land grabbing” with that of “control grabbing”, defined as “the power to control land and other associated resources such as water in order to derive benefit from such control of resources”. This conceptual shift enables to grasp the various uses of land resulting from capital accumulation. Control grabbing necessarily involves power relations and may include the dispossession of land, water and other resources. Control is concentrated in the hands of privileged groups, even if transactions do not involve full ownership alienation. The term control grabbing allows to understand how the spatial coordinates of land remain constant, while its global value shifts from human subsistence to capital accumulation.



The invisible actors: class, age and gender differences within rural communities

Most reports on land grabbing have relied on media reports rather than ground-level information. Only recently research has looked at the implications of land grabs for rural communities (Borras and Franco, 2013), since rural people are usually cast “simply as those whose lives and livelihoods ‘are affected’ and who must give (or not) ‘prior informed consent’” (Rocheleau, 2015).

In order to fully portray the implications of land grabbing for rural people, scholarship has attempted to undo the notion of homogeneous communities. Class, age and gender distinctions must be taken into account in the analysis. People’s experiences with multiple forms of oppression largely shape the ways in which they mobilize (Borras and Franco, 2013). There is no community harmony in land grabbing—rather, what prevails is the lack of choice among various actors with differential access to information and decision making power (Miyasaka and Shiraishi, 2014).

In terms of class distinctions, fissures may arise from the different systems of land entitlements existing within the community. Some groups may flagrantly oppose land deals, while others may be incorporated in them through employment or benefits resulting from land leasing or selling. Some people may resist dispossession itself, while others may focus on improving land prices or working conditions (Borras and Franco, 2013). Generational differences are also important because large-scale land deals usually close off farming options for various generations of small landholders. The voices of young people regarding land deals have remained unheard (Hall *et al.*, 2015).

Gender analysis has been more present in the literature, given the fact that women and girls are responsible for 60-80 % of food production worldwide, yet they own less than 10 % of the land (ActionAid, 2010). Gender scholars generally agree that land deals have not been beneficial for women. Women

have less bargain power *vis-à-vis* governmental authorities or investors, and have unequal representation in negotiations, so quite often they lack adequate information and are left out of consultation processes and decision making (Daley, 2011; Daley and Pallas, 2014; Fonjong *et al.*, 2016). When compensation exists, jobs and lump sum cash payments are mostly directed to men, while environmental impacts (*i.e.* increased difficulties to access water, fuel, edible plants and common property), which are usually overlooked or downplayed, affect women the most (White and White, 2011; Mutopo, 2012; Behrman *et al.*, 2012; Ossome, 2014; Wisborg, 2014; Fonjong *et al.*, 2016). Investors continue to focus on agriculture as an economic productivity, without acknowledging gender differences in access to land, labor and decision making (Verma, 2014).

Most gender analysis has focused only on gendered impacts and vulnerabilities (Daley and Pallas, 2014; Hall *et al.*, 2015). More research is needed on the whole process of land grabbing, including: 1) the gendered system of rights and responsibilities prior to land deals, containing what works better for women in terms of their strategies to assert land claims; 2) the differential impact of land grabbing on men and women depending on context and contract typologies; 3) men's and women's perceptions and understandings in terms of gains and threats before, during and after the process. Research needs to be contextualized according to various cultural regions, since legal traditions and gender norms differ significantly from one place to another (Chu, 2011; Behrman *et al.*, 2012; Doss *et al.*, 2014). Gender sensitive scholarship must also widen the possible array of grabbing actors— not only transnationals and governments, but also kin members and local elites (Doss *et al.*, 2014).

Also missing in the analysis are the gender-specific contents of displacement. Women whose land is being grabbed are often chased from their marital household and have to return to their natal home or migrate to urban areas full of stigma and shame (Verma, 2014). Needless to say, gender analysis must take an intersectional

approach in order to consider how gender interacts with other factors such as age, marital status, and ethnicity (Behrman *et al.*, 2012).

Land grabbing in Latin America and the Caribbean

As the process of land grabbing in Africa was increasingly acknowledged, FAO's Office for LAC organized a study of 17 countries in order to find out whether something similar was happening in the region. Results remain inconclusive. The FAO definition includes only the purchase or lease of land for the production of food with the involvement of at least one foreign government. According to it, land grabbing is occurring only in Argentina and Brazil (Soto and Gómez, 2012). Critics argue that FAO's narrow view is unable to address other driving forces of land grabbing beyond agribusiness, such as mining, hydroelectric projects, urbanization, tourism and green projects such as wind farms and REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) (Cotula, 2012; GRAIN, 2012).

A more recent publication also sponsored by FAO reaches different conclusions. Borras *et al.* (2014) point out that "land grabbing is taking place, albeit unevenly" between and within countries in LAC, and is likely to increase in the near future. In this new piece, land grabbing is defined as the concentration of land and/or capital occurring in the food and non-food sectors in three major ways: direct land grabs, "commodity grabs" (capture of goods and profits in the value chain) and "green grabs" (land grabs in the name of the environment). Ten countries are experiencing a high level of land grabbing (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay), while Panama, Mexico and Nicaragua are medium-level countries. The whole region is different from others due to 1) the significance of private lands transacted; 2) the key role of domestic elites as investors; 3) the significance of intra-regional deals; 4) the minimal presence of the Gulf States, China, South Korea and India as investors; 5) the fact that LAC countries do not have fragile governments, a

condition that facilitated land grabs in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, the LAC region shares with others the imperative to grow in the context of globalization and neoliberalism, as well as the agrarian changes pushed by the global food, fuel and climate crisis (Borras *et al.*, 2014).

Land grabbing in Mexico

Well into the end of the 20th century, 54.1 % (105 949 097 hectares) of the country's territory could not be part of the land market because it belonged to 5.6 million of *ejidatarios* or *comuneros* – mostly the grandchildren of landless peasants who fought in the revolution of 1910 and, as a result, gained access to agricultural lands locally defined as “social property” (*ejidos* and agrarian communities).

In 1992, the government declared an end to the State's constitutional obligation to distribute land, and promoted a package of reforms aimed at the commercialization of social property, with the idea that private investment would increase agricultural production. For the first time in modern Mexican history, the 1992 reform legalized the sale of *ejido* lands and investment associations with private companies. The reform was accompanied by a wide range of neoliberal policies, including trade liberalization (*i.e.* NAFTA, which came into place in January 1994) and the withdrawal of State support from national agricultural production in the form of technology and credits (Robles, 2012).

The 1992 reform did not deliver as expected. The *Ejido* Census of 2007 reported land sales in two thirds of *ejidos*, but most (82.4 %) were internal deals (among *ejidatarios* themselves). Transactions were small-scale, since they involved only approximately three million hectares of *ejido* lands (Robles, 2012). Accordingly, *dominio pleno*, the legal category designed to transform *ejido* lands into private property, has been very little used (Galeana, 2002; GRAIN, 2014). Only 5.3 % of *ejidos* had adopted *dominio pleno* by 2002 (Galeana, 2002). Most recent sources

point out that 4.4 % of total parceled lands, equivalent to 4.7 million hectares, have adopted *dominio pleno*, and around three million hectares have already been sold (GRAIN, 2014).

Agricultural production did indeed increase, but it concentrated in animal production (mostly poultry), vegetables, fruits and alcoholic beverages for exports rather than food consumed by Mexicans. In 2005, Mexican agricultural imports represented 40 % of the total national consumption, compared to 15 % in 1982 and 20 % in 2004. The financial resources invested in bringing food from abroad are equivalent to 54 % of the country's total oil revenues, or 72 % of the money sent to Mexico by outmigration (Quintana, 2007).

Agribusiness companies currently constitute key actors in Mexico's rural economy. These enterprises concentrate not only large amounts of production and government subsidies, but also land in the form of rentals. According to the 8th National Agricultural Census (Inegi, 2007), 28.8 % of agricultural lands are rented or loaned by their owners. Mexico's Department of Agriculture provides higher estimates – 50 % of productive, irrigated lands are rented during the autumn-winter period. In *Sinaloa* State, 36.8 % of arable lands (half a million hectares) are being used by only 500 large scale farmers.

As an alternative, enterprises may choose not to get involved directly into the productive process, but rather to engage into pre-harvest purchase agreements with small farmers, thereby becoming the most dominant option for the commercialization of agricultural products. This is particularly true for maize, fruits, sugar cane, coffee, vegetables, barley and dairy products (Robles, 2012). Six companies dominate in maize; six in fruit; five in coffee; five in dairies; and two in barley. The consolidation of these companies started with the structural reforms of the 1980s. By 2010, Mexico's food imports from the United States of America and through some of these companies were worth US\$20 thousand million (Gómez, 2014).

Thus, Mexico presents a very high concentration and foreignization of the agricultural chain value rather than land concentration *per se*, given the country's long standing agrarian tradition which inhibits large scale land transactions. Control grabbing is occurring in the form of land rentals, agreements between agribusiness and producers, and mining concessions (Robles, 2012). Mexico is in a medium-high position in the Concentration and Foreignization Typology proposed by FAO, together with countries like Chile, Colombia, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic and Uruguay (Gómez, 2014).

The Energy Reform of 2013 poses new threats because it pushes even further the possibility of transferring *ejido* lands to private hands. The reform declares the oil, mining and electric sectors as areas of public interest and a priority to the nation. *Ejidatarios* are obliged to cede their property to public enterprises or private companies if their lands have potential for energy, mining, oil and gas extraction. There is no limit to the extension of land that a company can use. Land can be sold, rented or put into "voluntary servitude" or "temporal occupation" by the company; *ejidatarios* are forced to accept land use changes. Presently, between 15 % and 50 % of the country's territory has already been occupied by mining companies, mostly Canadian (De la Cruz, 2016). According to the Movement for Food Sovereignty and Defense of Land, Water, Natural Resources and Territory, the Energy Reform could affect 60 % of *ejidos* and agrarian communities, with around 200 conflicts already occurring in the country (Hernández, 2016). The Mexican state has not only declined its obligation to distribute land—it has become the instrument of "accumulation by dispossession" that favors the multinational companies that control the value chain of a wide range of activities related to the financial, food, energy and climate crisis described above (Merchand, 2015).

"Green grabbing" in Mexico usually involves multiple forces and a diversity of actors driven both by conservation and tourism interests which are less visible than the large forms of grabbing, but no less significant (Rocheleau, 2015).

Carbon forestry in the Lacandon Jungle enables *ejidatarios* to keep their land titles, but they lose access to resources useful for subsistence due to the diversion of land and labor from use value to commodity production, with very few financial gains obtained in return (Osborne, 2011). Similar processes have been identified in state-operated, clientelistic oil palm programs also conducted in *Chiapas* (Castellanos and Jansen, 2015). REDD+ early actions implemented in some regions of the country are changing land use patterns without respecting indigenous peoples' rights to previous, free and informed consent (González, 2016).

Final comments

This paper has discussed the most important issues regarding land grabbing as outlined in one decade of scholarly research. Among these are extension, measurement scale, purpose and novelty. The paper also brings attention to two major debates in land grabbing literature: its contribution (if any) to rural development; and the role of rural actors in the process, with particular focus on LAC and Mexico.

In terms of extension, there is no agreement as to how large the land grabbing phenomenon is. Figures range from 20 to 227 million hectares depending on the source – whether deals are in process, completed or acknowledged by government institutions. Part of the problem in definitions is the measurement scale being used. Two benchmarks were identified in the literature: more than 200 hectares; 1 000 hectares and above. However, a key factor in this discussion is not so much the number of hectares, but rather their productive value for economic gain, a very useful conceptual shift that renders visible the operation of capital in land grabbing.

The purpose of land grabbing as originally stated, was to satisfy the food and fuel needs of developed countries with little land and water to satisfy them. The concept has widened to address the convergence of multiple crises: financial, food,

energy/fuel and climate, with “flex crops” as an example of this. Important differences exist within various regions. Most land for food and biofuel production concentrate in Sub-Saharan Africa, while in LAC, flex crop production has been promoted by leftist governments. The region also reports larger evidence of “green grabbing” for the purpose of conservation when compared to Africa.

Land grabbing has called the attention of important global institutions (the World Bank and FAO), national governments (Germany) and international organizations such as Action Aid, International Land Coalition, OXFAM and GRAIN. Scholars have also written extensively on the issue. Not surprisingly, there is little agreement on its impacts and benefits—even the terminology used varies.

The World Bank considers that land deals or transactions (as opposed to land grabbing) have the potential to be beneficial if some measures are taken to protect food security, governance, social participation, environmental sustainability and land rights. FAO prefers the term land markets and provides very conservative definitions (1 000 hectares or more as the benchmark; only land to produce food; deals must involve a foreign government) to describe their dynamics. Detractors believe that land grabbing not only is real; it often involves more resources (*i.e.* water, carbon) for the purpose of capital accumulation and control transfer from the rural poor to privileged groups, even if transactions do not involve full ownership alienation.

Various authors have called for the need to examine the impacts of land grabbing on rural communities, arguing that the voices of the most affected remain unheard. Some scholarship has gone beyond the notion of community harmony in order to address different perceptions of land grabbing based on class, age and gender. The most researched category of social differentiation has been that of gender. Scholars have shown that land deals have not been beneficial for women due to their unequal representation in negotiations, lack of access to benefits (*i.e.* jobs, lump sum cash payments) and increasing difficulties to access resources that are key for food security and family wellbeing (water, fuel, edible plants). More comparative

research is needed on the before and after of land deals; impacts depending on regional disparities and contract typologies; gender-specific contents of displacement; and variations depending on women's age, marital status, ethnicity and life cycle.

LAC was the focus of a FAO well-researched document that analyzes land grabbing in 17 countries, if only to conclude that it is incipient and occurring in Argentina and Brazil due to the very narrow definition used. A later publication also sponsored by FAO concludes that land grabbing is taking place to different degrees in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Panama, Mexico and Nicaragua. The definition now includes not only the food but also the non-food sectors-- "commodity grabs" and "green grabs".

Mexico stands out as a particularly interesting case study due to its long standing agrarian tradition which has allowed for half its territory to remain in the hands of peasants. The country presents a very high concentration and foreignization of the agricultural chain value rather than land concentration per se. Control grabbing is occurring in the form of contract agriculture and mining concessions. The Energy Reform of 2013 is likely to push this trend even further, since small land holders are obliged by law to cede their property to public or private agencies seeking to invest in areas of national interest-- energy, mining, oil and gas extraction. "Green grabbing" is also on the increase and it often involves the diversion of land and labor from use value to commodity production as well as the violation of indigenous peoples' right to previous, free and informed consent.

In spite of the large amount of information produced so far, very little is known still on land grabbing. All of the issues discussed in this paper – extent, scale, purpose and novelty need to be further researched in order to reach more precision. The World Bank and FAO's attempts to regulate or minimize it through the use of more neutral terms show precisely how important it is to continue documenting the economic, environmental and social impacts of land grabbing in the global South. This paper has identified some regional/country distinctions that need to be further

researched, as well as some factors of social differentiation (class, age, gender) of which it nothing or very little is known. More research is needed on food security, job creation and environmental conditions prior and after land deals. Case studies should be combined with large scale analysis so as to properly link the local with the global. Internal division based on class, age and gender distinctions must be taken into account in order to full grasp the consequences of land grabbing in various regions of the world.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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