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## Land grabbing and its environmental justice implications

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# Analysing the governance of land grabbing from a combined political ecology and environmental justice perspective\*

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## Abstract

In this chapter we link ‘political ecology’ and ‘environmental justice’ frameworks to analyse land grabbing and its implications for governance. Building on these scholarships, we identified five key elements for understanding the governance of land grabbing: (i) past and present policies and practices enabling unequal land ownership and access, (ii) the relationship between social and environmental expressions and *visa-versa*, (iii) geographical scales and multi-scalar analysis, (iv) temporal dimensions, and (v) context and diversity. This chapter stresses that examinations of land grabbing that are inflected by political ecology and environmental justice frames will allow for a better comprehension of the multi- and inter scalar mechanisms, processes, and practices that lead to inequality. This approach will also allow for a better understanding of how ongoing urbanization fuels the phenomenon of land grabbing, as rural areas serve to produce commodities consumed in urban localities.

### Keywords

Environmental justice movements, governance, social impacts, rural development, urbanization, land acquisition.

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how and why land grabbing occurs and offers a framework to analyse land grabbing from a combined political ecology and environmental justice perspective. Such an approach looks at land grabbing from the perspective of the understudied multi-scalar mechanisms, processes and practices that lead to inequality (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Schlosberg, 2004; 2013). By drawing synergies between political ecology and environmental justice, this chapter also enhances the understanding of the governance of land grabbing and the multi-scalar socio-political processes underlying the increasing trade in and use of natural resources in Asia, Latin America, Africa and elsewhere. On the one hand, political ecology draws attention to power inequalities among actors operating at different spatial scales who aim to gain access to the environment (Little, 2007). On the other hand, environmental justice studies inequity in the local distribution of environmental harms and goods (Schlosberg, 2013). The exposure to negative environmental effects such as overexploitation and pollution is uneven. As reported by several studies, certain social groups suffer the negative impacts of the growing demand for land and resources disproportionately. This is usually the case for women, indigenous communities, and the rural poor. It is argued that the disproportionate negative effects of land-based projects on certain people largely depend on class, status, age, gender, ethnicity and capabilities (Alden Wily, 2011; Escobar, 2006; Hall et al., 2015; Wolford et al., 2013). Thus, this chapter contributes to a growing body of literature on the governance of land grabbing by calling attention to issues of exclusion, socio-environmental transformations, power inequalities, and connections among different spatial scales. The main questions discussed are: 'What are the socio-political and socio-economic drivers triggering land grabbing?' and 'How and why does land grabbing and its governance create and reproduce socio-environmental injustice?' We will explore these questions in the sections below.

This chapter unfolds as follows. Section two presents the drivers and implications of land grabbing governance and the interlinked socio-environmental transformations, including the manifestation of social resistance and protest as a response to land grabbing (Hanna et al., 2016; Vira, 2015). Section three discusses the contribution of political ecology and environmental justice to the analysis of land grabbing. From the cross-fertilization of these two bodies of scholarship, section four zooms into five key elements for the understanding of land grabbing and its governance roots and implications: (i) past and present policies and practices enabling unequal land ownership and access, (ii) the relationship between social and environmental expressions and visa-versa, (iii) geographical scales and multi-scalar analysis, (iv) temporal dimensions, and (v) context and diversity. The chapter concludes with a plea for a combined political ecology and environmental justice lens, as a basis for a thicker socio-political framework to study the contemporary governance of land and land grabbing, and notably the drivers, mechanisms, consequences and processes from which (in)equality is reproduced.

## 2.2 The drivers and implications of land grabbing governance

Land grabbing promotes a socio-environmental transformation that is produced at broader spatial scales. Land grabbing provokes alterations on day-to-day life for rural people by, for example, land use changes but also land tenure insecurity and conflict (Borras & Franco, 2012; Zoomers, 2010). Moreover, land grabbing constitutes a socio-environmental transformation as it highlights the ongoing changes from nature being a local resource for livelihood reproduction to nature being a commodity that can be accessed and transformed by powerful entities. We develop these characteristics in the rest of this section.

Land grabbing exacerbates unequal access to resources and diminishes the opportunities for local people to derive benefits from nature. Unequal power contributes to processes of unequal distribution of resource access (Escobar, 2008). For companies on the other side of the world, gaining land access and control is often easier than for local communities to maintain access and control over land, even though they have been living and working on the land for decades (McMichael, 2012).

Actors in land grabbing operate across different spatial scales. These include land investors ranging from state authorities, private firms and social elites (Alden Wily, 2011). Investors also include hedge funds speculating with pension funds over the turnover of land investment projects (Grain, 2012). States play a crucial role in allowing land grabbing by companies. For example, states pave the way for land grabs through the introduction of policies such as those lowering barriers to (foreign) investment (Alden Wily, 2011; Dwyer, 2013).

Land grabbing thus contains clashing ideas and discourses of what development means and how development should unfold (Banerjee, 2015; Wolford et al., 2013). Local authorities and global development institutions, for example the World Bank, mobilize ‘modernization’ and ‘pro-development’ discourses to approve and stimulate conditions favouring land grabs. The idea of the existence of “marginal, under-utilized, empty, and available lands” further stimulates the introduction of the ‘pro’ land grabbing discourses (Borras, 2016, 6). As a result, land grabbing opens a route to economic growth by (violently) dispossessing people of their land (Alden Wily, 2011; van der Ploeg & Vanclay, 2017).

The social, economic and political factors underlying land grabbing and unequal land transactions are complex. A first driver is the growing demand for commodities across the globe and the concomitant production of commodities at competitive prices relying on cheap labour force, and weak or inexistent environmental regulations (Fairhead et al., 2012; Zoomers, 2010). A second driver is related to the role of (neoliberal) states in enacting policy mechanisms to

facilitate the international trade of commodities and accompanying land transactions (Blaikie, 1999; Brenner et al., 2010). The privatization of goods and deregulation of states are a core component of a neoliberal economic system that allows land grabbing (Fairhead et al., 2012; Zoomers, 2010). Third, land grabbing is also promoted by postcolonial development strategies and discourses that aim to improve social and economic conditions of 'developing countries' through land investments (Escobar, 2008). In practice, these different drivers reinforce each other; land grabbing often makes it impossible for local communities to maintain a proper livelihood on the land, and consequently local people might be forced to lease or sell land to investors, facilitating land grabbing.

As introduced earlier, land grabbing takes place at the cost of local people, their communities, health and the physical environment (Escobar, 2004; 2006; Svampa & Viale, 2014). From a social perspective, land grabbing may result in human right violations, a clash between formal and customary land rights, loss of job opportunities, severe livelihood changes, and displacement and dispossession (Alden Wily, 2011; Banerjee, 2015; van der Ploeg & Vanclay, 2017). It also results in increased land prices and reduced possibilities for local people to regain land ownership (Davis et al., 2014). From an environmental perspective, land grabbing leads to the exploitation of land, including biodiversity loss, ecosystem deteriorations, water scarcity and pollution (Svampa & Viale, 2014).

The impact of land grabbing on local communities is uneven depending on the local context, history and social compositions (Busscher et al., 2018). In some cases, certain social groups may be able to benefit from land investments (Edelman & León, 2013; Hall et al., 2015). Typically, the most negatively affected people are those lacking adequate financial means to respond and adapt to new situations. These are usually those who have not secured land tenure before the start of the land rush. In the words of Vira (2015, 773), "there is growing evidence that the poor feel the impact of natural resource loss disproportionately". From this perspective, it can be argued that land grabbing leads to the aggravation of pre-existing inequalities and injustice. Bearing this in mind, below, we look at three relevant issues to understand the reproduction of inequalities, namely historical mechanisms of exclusion, indigeneity and gender.

Complex historical land use arrangements and tenure affect the relationship between the causes and effects of land grabbing (Mamonova, 2015), notably the overlooked link between land grabbing and dispossession (Alden Wily, 2011; Boamah & Overå, 2015). In many countries, the enduring land tenure informality facilitates land grabbing. Furthermore, pre-existing instances of injustice and informal rules regarding who is and who is not allowed to use land can aggravate the negative impacts of land grabbing (Boamah & Overå, 2015). Research in Ghana by Boamah & Overå (2015) showed how local leaders negotiating land distribution with a biofuel

company deliberately excluded other community members. According to their research, local chiefs leading land transactions with the company, excluded community members without clear antecedents to claim land. These include those community members lacking family ties, social networks, or working antecedents in the community. Other research showed that traditional leaders approved land transactions that led to displacement of local people. The approval by local leaders granted permission for land grabs even when other community members were against land leases (Alden Wily, 2011). These results suggest that there are local winners and losers in land negotiations, depending on particular historical antecedents (Edelman & León, 2013; Mamonova, 2015) and power structures within communities. Therefore, local communities are to be considered as spaces where a plurality of ideas, opinions and power dynamics exist.

Indigeneity is another socio-political layer prominent in the land grabbing literature (Borras & Franco, 2012; de Schutter, 2011). Indigenous peoples are the ones suffering the most from instances of injustice; they have been harmed disproportionately in the past and today they face the lack of recognition of ethnic rights and customary laws (Carruthers, 2008; de Schutter, 2011; Global Witness, 2016; Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). A tension exists between the historical marginalization of Indigenous groups and recent attempts to recompense these harms roughly since the 1990s. The creation of rights, based on ethnic values, provide a way to claim and restore resource access. In many countries, numerous native peoples are claiming land rights based on their ancestral origins (Hanna & Vanclay, 2013; Leguizamón, 2014; Parra & Moulart, 2016). International conventions, such as the International Labour Organization Convention 169 and the Principle of Free Prior and Informed Consent, support these claims. Both conventions give Indigenous peoples better protection against evictions, destruction of their environment, and also encourage participation in decision-making over development projects (Hanna & Vanclay, 2013). However, when Indigenous peoples lack certain stereotypical ethnic characteristics and behaviour, it becomes difficult for them to be recognized as Indigenous and therefore to benefit from institutionalized policies and programs that target them (see Ojeda, 2012). Being 'non-Indigenous' or Indigenous contributes to the complex socio-political struggle underlying land grabbing practices.

Gender inequality is also an important element to consider at the local level within the discussion on land grabbing (Alden Wily, 2011; de Schutter, 2011; Hall et al., 2015). Deere and León (2003) discussed how gender inequality in land ownership in Latin America plays a role in current landscapes of production, giving particular attention to male dominance in decision-making over land. In another research, Deere and León (2001) showed how land titling programs in Latin America during the 1990s led to redistribution of land to farmers that disadvantaged women. In many other parts of the world, male inheritance of the land continuous to be the cultural norm. In Uganda, for example, women are disadvantaged in landownership when divorced or widowed

(Adoko & Levine, 2009). Gender is a crucial element considering that the marginalization of women in land tenure plays a crucial role in limiting the possibilities for economic empowerment and emancipation (Deere & León, 2003).

The risk of being excluded or unjustly treated in land deals triggers resistance among local communities (Escobar, 2008; Grajales, 2013; Hall et al., 2015; Leguizamón, 2014; Ojeda, 2012). Hall et al. (2015) explain that resistance comes in many forms. Local people may organize against corporations and landed elites, against the state, and within their own localities. Resistance and protest have different purposes, including the disruption or cancellation of projects, and the exercise of political pressure for being included in land deals (Hall et al., 2015; Hanna et al., 2016). Resistance can also lead to alliances among actors which traditionally would not work together, such as collaborations between the government and social movements (Vergara-Camus & Kay, 2017). As a result, resistance and protest actions are constantly renegotiating how and by whom space is owned, accessed and controlled (Hanna et al., 2016; Horlings, 2018; Massey, 2005).

Resistance is a sign of socio-political dynamism of communities which could lead to empowerment, new knowledge and skills, and enhance awareness about their rights. As explored by Hanna et al. (2016), protest can create social capital and lead to improved well-being, especially when protest claims are met. Of course, local communities and social movements face many constraints to voice their concerns and needs. As a result, land grabbing can simultaneously erode communities and stimulate community participation and knowledge creation. This is not to say that protest and resistance is without a risk, there are many cases worldwide in which activists are criminalized or even murdered because of their mobilization (Global Witness, 2016). Grasping both the drivers and consequences of land grabbing means to consider several interacting variables, such as distributional and procedural issues, spatial and temporal scales, local contexts, and entangled social and environmental transformations. Several of these matters have been studied by land grabbing scholars yet important gaps remain. Among these gaps, we can mention the limited attention given to the environmental side of land grabbing and the lack of long-term analyses of the multiple impacts of land grabbing (see Li, 2017). From a socio-political perspective, limited attention has been given to resistance and its influence in the governance of land, as well as to the inter-scalar connections between local and global processes and the actors revolving around these processes. By synergizing political ecology and environmental justice scholarship, the following section aims at contributing to further knowledge on these gaps.



## 2.3 The contribution of Political Ecology and Environmental Justice in the context of Land Grabbing

The study of land grabbing from a perspective that puts political ecology and environmental justice together allows quite a complete grasp of the multiple factors and mechanisms reproducing unequal land transactions. As further discussed below, political ecology assists in connecting interacting multi-scalar processes and analysing the role of the multiple actors involved in the governance of land grabbing, without forgetting the material or biophysical side of land grabbing. Environmental justice, for its part, contributes to the understanding to the main local conditions under which different types of injustices are reproduced within an environment exposed to land grabbing practices and processes.

### 2.3.1 Political Ecology

Political ecology is a field of investigation and a form of criticism to contemporary environmental politics, which emerged as a critique to mainstream apolitical analysis of environmental issues (Peet et al., 2011; Robbins, 2004). Mainstream explanations of environmental control and change included issues such as population growth and the lack of technology to cope with environmental decay (Peet et al., 2011). Alternatively, political ecologists provided explanations highlighting the importance of power, international trade, careless human behaviour, and the rapid development of capitalism (Blaikie, 1999; Bryant & Bailey, 1997). It was argued that the supremacy of the market in environmental regulation reproduces social inequalities (Peet et al., 2011). Land grabbing, land use change, and contestation over land use and access are a good illustration of the responsibility of market actors in generating environmental degradation and socio-political conflict (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Leguizamón, 2014; Nixon, 2011; Svampa & Viale, 2014).

A major concern in political ecology is the socio-political contestation over the access to resources (Blaikie, 1999; Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Robbins, 2004). From an analytical perspective, political ecology examines the roles of various actors and their power relationships, including states, multilateral institutions, transnational corporations and local businesses, (environmental) nongovernmental organizations and social movements (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). One distinctive feature of political ecology is the study of the interlinked and multi-scalar socio-political processes that operate at the local, regional and global scales (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Robbins, 2004).

Political ecology investigates unequal resource access and unequal distribution of benefits disadvantaging vulnerable groups in society (Peet et al., 2011). Powerful actors, such as companies, often contribute to and aggravate instances of injustice and inequality. Therefore, political ecologists look at the political mechanisms generating these inequalities, including how access to re-

sources and land determine the possibilities to develop a proper livelihood (Blanc & Soini, 2015). Starting from the premise of the indivisibility of nature and society (Cook & Swyngedouw, 2014), political ecology highlights the connections between the economic interests lying beneath the contemporary trade of commodities and the consequent environmental and social degradations experienced by local communities. Land grabbing is a good example in this respect, showing how contemporary political-economic logics play a major role in decision-making over land. In the prevailing economic logic, the multiple local values of land for local users is not accounted for, generating major consequences. These include conflict but also a forced adaptation by local people to unhealthy land use practices, such as the spraying of agrochemicals (Leguizamón, 2014).

In the section below, we further explore the issues that are of particular interest in studying land grabbing. By bringing on board literature on environmental justice, we zoom in on the instances of injustice arising from projects and programs at the local scale.

### **2.3.2 Environmental Justice**

Environmental justice scholarship examines the unequal and asymmetrical distribution of harmful environmental side effects on certain social groups (Schlosberg, 2004). These groups are predominantly situated in countries in the southern hemisphere or are vulnerable groups in the North (Escobar, 2004; Haluza-DeLay et al., 2009). Environmental justice issues are related to localized environmental conflicts that are place-based and that may get national or even global attention (Coenen & Halfacre, 2003).

Environmental justice movements in the USA triggered the development of the environmental justice field in the early 1980s. In Warren County in South Carolina, a large African-American population resisted the siting of a hazardous waste landfill in their neighbourhood. Deprived social groups and racial minorities considered this landfill as environmental racism (Coenen & Halfacre, 2003). Since the conflict in Warren County, environmental justice issues have been further developed. Justice is now recognized as a plural notion with changing meanings according to the context specificities (Sikor, 2013). At the same time, there is also a recognition that justice should be considered as a universally shared notion, in addition to its focus on how people experience (in)justice in particular contexts (Sikor, 2013). Four main topics have become central to the environmental justice debate: (i) distribution of environmental harms and goods; (ii) participation in decision-making processes; (iii) procedural justice and; (iv) recognition and respect for alternative cultures. As Schlosberg (2004) explained, these topics are interlinked 'circles of concern' within environmental justice scholarship. More recent topics include the relationship between human beings and nature (Schlosberg, 2007) and the one between capabilities and justice (see Sen, 1985, 2009; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993 on the capability approach). Below, we discuss the first four main topics of concern.

### **Distribution**

There is an uneven distribution of environmental goods, bads and risks between people and places (Escobar, 2008). People and localities with higher vulnerability and lower resilience are usually the ones enduring the negative externalities reproducing situations of inequality (Carruthers, 2008; Walker & Bulkeley, 2006). Local communities, poor people, ethnic minorities and marginalized groups suffer environmental risks and discrimination disproportionately (Cook & Swyngedouw, 2012). The planned landfill in Warren County in an area with a 65% African-American population illustrates the uneven distribution of environmental harms (Coenen & Halfacre, 2003). Social and environmental injustice also adversely affects Indigenous peoples and women (Carruthers, 2008; Cook & Swyngedouw, 2012; Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). Conversely, elites and rich people benefit disproportionately from a healthy environment, 'clean' technologies, sustainability progress among others.

### **Participation**

In the planning of investment projects and programs there is often a lack of participation of local people (Schlosberg, 2004; Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). The involvement of local communities in decision-making processes can take different forms, from exclusion in participatory processes to co-construction of projects through which benefits are shared in more equal way. There are several critical elements to participation from an environmental justice perspective. First, the state and companies usually do not include local communities and Indigenous peoples in the decision-making over land investment and extractive projects (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). Second, there is no transparent and fair information given to local communities regarding the possible risks of projects and investments. Third, when there is only one or multiple community representative(s) participating in decision-making, it is unclear if the interests and needs of the entire community are represented (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Consequently, investment projects can also lead to conflict and struggles within communities if people do not share the same opinion (Alden Wily, 2011). Criticism to participation is ample; participation can be exercised in such a way that it merely paves the way for unjust and illegitimate power manifestations; and local community's participation in decision-making spaces can too fast be interpreted by company managers as an implicit approval of a certain investment (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Velicu & Kaika, 2015).

### **Procedural justice**

Procedural justice focuses on more transparent, open and democratic decision-making processes (Schlosberg, 2004) and implies that "governing rules and regulations, evaluation criteria, and enforcement are applied in a non-discriminatory manner" (Coenen & Halfacre, 2003, 189). In places with high social vulnerability, companies tend to have less respect for environmental laws (Coenen & Halfacre, 2003). Moreover, Coenen & Halfacre (2003), suggested that the amount of

penalties given to minorities and white people in law violations differed significantly. In practice, procedural justice points to the sharing of clear, complete and honest information regarding, for example, the social and environmental risks of investment projects. Even in the case of confidential investments and information, local people have the right to accessible information, including written documentation in appropriate local language(s). Better access to just information by local people leads to an improved control over and management of the environment (Blaikie & Muldavin, 2014). Consequently, it is less likely that local communities will tolerate distributional injustice when honest information is available. From this perspective, impartiality and treating all concerned parties in an unbiased manner can prevent the emergence of conflicts (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010).

### **Recognition and respect**

A misrecognition and lack of respect of other cultures and ways of living exacerbates the uneven distribution of environmental harms and goods (Fraser, 2000). A lack of respect and recognition of other people's life indicates that certain societal standards are seen as superior or more important. Moreover, the multifaceted connection people have with the environments where they 'live, work and play' (Novotny, 2000) is neglected in many development projects and programs. Development projects in the South that involve land use changes, have influenced severely, and in many cases broke the more traditional connection between nature and people (Parra & Mouleart, 2016).

The importance of respecting the inseparability of human and nature in land grabbing practices is expressed in the concept of *biocultural* diversity defined by Blanc and Soini (2015, 80) as "the diversity of life in all its manifestations (biological, cultural, and forms), which are all interrelated". This concept simultaneously refers to a healthy environment, meaning an environment with high biodiversity, and to cultural diversity involving respect and recognition of different types of knowledge, languages and ways of living (Blanc & Soini, 2015). The concept of *biocultural* diversity is a criticism to large-scale industrial commodity production (monocultures) and to the equalizing cultural attempts land grabbing provokes. This concept, connects the literature on land grabbing, political ecology and environmental justice as it promotes a healthy environment and sustainable ways of production while respecting local people.

## **2.4 Connecting Land Grabbing, Political Ecology and Environmental Justice**

The connections between political ecology, environmental justice and land grabbing literature help to uncover the socio-political interrelations between people, nature, the economy, pow-

er asymmetries, scales and arenas of injustice. Further elaborating on Cook and Swyngedouw (2012), bringing political ecology and environmental justice together allows to further the understanding of changing human-nature relations, by means of reinstating the embeddedness of local socio-political realities in broader multi-scalar dynamics and processes.

### **2.4.1 Global issues in land grabbing**

From a global level perspective, political ecology helps to explain how land grabbing is a typical example of market-led economic development, conditioned and designed at different geographical scales, which goes at the expense of local environmental and social justice (Borras et al., 2013). Political ecology brings knowledge on board on the dominance of powerful and rich actors controlling the bargaining over the access to natural resources, and privatizing and patenting all life forms (Borras et al., 2013). Considering that nature, as a 'scarce ecological space', has production and use limits the concentration of ownership becomes a global distributional matter enhancing the divide between rich and less well-off countries, and between present-day and future generations (Vira, 2015, 764).

Environmental justice calls attention to several important global issues in land grabbing. The citizens of many southern countries are increasingly confronted to the negative effects of resource exploitation and land grabbing (Schlosberg, 2013; Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). Environmental justice should be understood in its relation to social justice, notably from the perspective of the worldwide unequal distribution of wealth (Walker & Bulkeley, 2006). Moreover, the multi-scalar spatial component of land grabbing implies and relies on the transfer of negative effects and burdens to other scales, localities around the world and also to the food people eat, the clothes people wear, and the garbage people dispose (Agyeman et al., 2016).

### **2.4.2 Local issues in land grabbing**

At the local level, political ecology addresses several implications of land grabbing. Taking the concerns over the environment as a starting point, land grabbing and the consequent land use changes, are responsible for ecological degradation (Borras et al., 2013). In this respect, the study of environmental bads and goods in land grabbing calls for a critical engagement with the biophysical elements of socio-environmental change. This includes, for example, analysing how flora and fauna changes over time, water flows and situations of water stress, various forms of pollution, among many others, in the interrelation with the key production activities in the area (Cook & Swyngedouw, 2012; Little, 2007; Robbins, 2004). In addition, as land grabbing takes places in an arena of unequal power relations, political ecology can help to understand the dynamics of oppression and dispossession undergone by local groups.

Environmental justice literature brings tools to analyse the disproportionately local suffering of

vulnerable people like those with limited financial means, women and Indigenous people exposed to land grabbing (Alden Wily, 2011; Deere & León, 2003; de Schutter, 2011; Vira, 2015). Power imbalance is also greatly problematized in environmental justice research, explaining the process of land grabbing in certain localities. Another local environmental justice consequence of land grabbing is the increasing exclusion of local people from democratic participatory practices. Moreover, the loss of access to land and resources entails the growing proletarianization of family farmers at the expense of a more diverse human-nature relationship.

### **2.4.3 Zooming in on five key elements for analysing land grabbing and its governance**

Analysing land grabbing and its governance implications is multifaceted and complex. Land grabbing provokes local transformations that cannot be analysed in isolation, notably in terms of multi-scalar governance processes that reproduce inequality and injustice. Understanding land grabbing and its implications means to be attentive to many variables, including distributional and procedural issues, local contexts, and combined social and environmental transformations. Governance is a constant process of negotiation, restructuring and readjustment, among a plurality of actors and institutions operating at various spatial scales (Swyngedouw, 2005). Therefore, governance is context dependent and time sensitive, and comprises changing power and scalar dynamics, which are connected from the local to the global.

Further elaborating on political ecology and environmental justice literature, we consider the following five key elements for the analysis of land grabbing and its governance. First, the policies and practices introduced by the ones in power, in the present and the past, enabling unequal land ownership and access is an important component to understand contemporary land ownership and access (Mamonova, 2015). In Argentina, for example, Spanish colonizers were one of the first to create formal land division favouring large-scale land ownership (Slutzky, 2014). This historical land division has two main effects. On the one hand, contemporary land investments are based on relatively large plots of land. On the other hand, the division of large cadastral plots into smaller ones is expensive, and thus, obstructing the possibilities for local people to buy small pieces of land and gain formal land title.

Second, it is highly relevant to combine social and ecological aspects in studies of land use, land governance and land grabbing as both elements go hand in hand. Increasing land privatization and control by grabbers lead to many communities being enclosed or 'enclaved', through fences, plantations and other barriers (Li, 2017; Zoomers, 2010). These enclosures without a doubt influence how local people interact with their environment. In addition to access and tenure possibilities, land grabbing has an ecological impact, including changes in soil composition, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Many land grabs involve a change from small-scale farming to industrial production, and therefore attention is needed in terms of the destruction of biocultural diversity

and capabilities due to changes in production modes.

Third, scales and multi-scalar analysis are crucial to understand the interconnection among different spatial scales and competing interests over the environment, connecting global agreements and their local outcomes. From this perspective, power inequalities and unequal distribution of goods and services at multiple levels are two core dimensions of the multi-scalar decision-making processes over land. The 'land making' is in the hand of different actors such as the state, companies, social movements, civil society, NGOs and diverse local groups. We highlight the role of social movements in articulating discontent to land grabbing at different scales, as well as their potential to trigger procedural, policy and participatory changes.

Fourth, temporal dimensions, including path dependencies and path breakings, are relevant when studying instances of injustice within the lifecycles of communities (Li, 2017). Human-nature relations are dynamic, diverse and they change over time. Moreover, some of the consequences of land grabbing are unpredictable and might only manifest in the future (Nixon, 2011). We should not forget that the process of commodification of nature, related to deforestation, large-scale industrial farming, and the use of pesticides to just mention a few, is causing irreversible socio-ecological change which in many cases is overlooked and purposely ignored (also conceptualized 'slow violence' by Nixon, 2011). Conversely, time could also influence situations in which land investments could bring positive effects (Boamah & Overå, 2015), including awareness of local communities and their rights.

The fifth element refers to an analysis of land grabbing that is context and diversity sensitive (Escobar, 2004), as defined by the environmental justice in terms of recognition and respect. By context and diversity sensitive we mean giving attention to diversity of cultures, livelihoods, and modes of interaction with nature which are not static but changing over time. Diversity of culture refers to diversity in practices, systems of knowledge, beliefs, values, norms, identities and socio-political organizations of human societies. At the same time, human groups relate, value and use nature in different ways, leading to development paths that are more or less sustainable (Parra, 2018; Pilgrim & Pretty, 2010). In this respect, labelling certain people in fixed boxes of 'Indigenous' 'underdeveloped' or 'peasant' is problematic as it gives a "single, drastically simplified group-identity" and reinforces stigmas (Fraser, 2000, 112).

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the socio-political and socio-economic drivers triggering land grabbing and gave special attention to how and why land grabbing creates social and environmental injustice. Among key drivers are the demand for commodities, the commodification of land, and flexible social and environmental regulations that attract investors to certain countries. Among the consequences discussed in this chapter, we can mention enhanced social exclusion of rural communities and power inequalities, as well as various environmental unsustainabilities. A focus on governance allows connecting both the drivers and the consequences of land grabbing. On the one hand, the contemporary multi-scalar governance of commodity production enables land grabbing; on the other hand, the governance of land grabbing reinforces the localized reproduction of injustice by further stimulating land control by elites.

A delicate issue in the governance of land grabbing is the process through which local communities resist, negotiate and fight for their rights. Their resistance and protest can in some cases lead to empowerment, more equality, justice and to social innovation when land tenure and access is secured (i.e. land making). However, we should not forget that in many cases resistance leads to criminalization, violence, disempowerment, extreme violations of human rights, and in the worst-case, death (Global Witness, 2016). The role of the state to prevent and address these issues is at least twofold. First, warranting meaningful and democratic decision-making for communities. Second, addressing seriously its historical socio-political debts, as well as environmental ones, with rural communities and their land. The vulnerability and injustice experienced by rural communities will exacerbate without a state that addresses both issues.

At a first glance, the phenomenon of land grabbing and its governance seem to be mainly rural. However, land grabbing cannot be disassociated from ongoing urbanization and real-estate development (Dirlik, 2017), notably of those from the global North. Rural areas serve to produce commodities, which are used by industries that steer various urban expansion processes worldwide. In this respect, we consider that synergies between political ecology and environmental justice have the potential to further explain the connections between the rural and the urban.



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