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## Land grabbing and its environmental justice implications

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# 4

## Environmental justice implications of land grabbing for industrial agriculture and forestry in Argentina\*

\*This paper is under review with an international peer-reviewed journal

## Abstract

Land grabbing leads to the displacement of smallholders, resulting in social impacts, injustice, and conflict. We use 'environmental justice' to analyse land grabbing and associated transformative actions, including resistance, protest, and proactive efforts by local communities. Qualitative research was undertaken in Argentina to investigate land grabbing for the expansion of tree plantations and agriculture. We found that local vulnerabilities mean people tend not to resist or proactively organize against land grabs. Resistance is influenced by historical, geographical, financial, political and social factors. Local people often consider pre-existing injustices to be more pressing than land grabbing issues. They often tacitly accept injustices resulting in communities becoming displaced, fenced-in, or forcibly evicted. Consequently, already-vulnerable people continue to live in unhealthy conditions, insecure tenure situations, and bear a disproportionate social and environmental burden. More attention should be given to pre-existing vulnerabilities and to improving the wellbeing of people affected by agriculture and forestry.

## Keywords

Environmental justice; green grabbing; resistance; extractivism; industrial agriculture

## 4.1 Introduction

Rural areas in Argentina are experiencing considerable spatial change, with the restructuring of places, livelihoods and landscapes (Jara and Paz, 2013). This re-organization is occurring partly because of investments in agriculture, agroforestry, mining, conservation and land speculation (Borras et al., 2012; Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016; Jara and Paz, 2013). These land investments are primarily being undertaken by foreign companies, but also by domestic companies, sometimes with foreign capital (Jara and Paz, 2013; Murmis and Murmis, 2012). This land grabbing results in a change in land use from family farming to industrial tree monoculture and intensive agriculture (Borras et al., 2012).

Land grabs typically occur at the detriment of the local rural populations, and have led to tenure insecurity, competing claims over land, resistance, protest, and violence (Brent, 2015; Gutiérrez and Gonzalez, 2016; Reboratti, 2008). One reason for contestation is the large extent of informal land use in Argentina (Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016; Jara and Paz, 2013). Another issue is differences in the meaning of land between investors and local people (Escobar, 2000; Stanley, 2009). For many rural people, especially Indigenous peoples, land is essential for the continuation of their livelihood activities and for the reproduction of their social, cultural, and spiritual practices (Hanna et al., 2016a; Pilgrim and Pretty, 2011). However, this strong connection to land is not usually considered by investors or the state (Matulis, 2014; Zoomers, 2010).

Market driven land investments can have serious consequences, including social and environmental impacts, and human rights violations (Escobar, 2000; Vanclay, 2017; Veltmeyer and Petras, 2014). These include the lack of respect for customary and informal land tenure, the lack of influence of local communities in decision-making, diminishing resource access, and insecurity as land grabbing involves dispossession and violence (Garcia-Lopez and Arizpe, 2010; Grajales, 2011; Hanna et al., 2016a; Lapegna, 2012). Many countries in the Global South bear the “disproportionate negative environmental and social cost of global production” (Carruthers, 2008, 2). This burden is directly related to (over)consumption in many Western societies (Martínez-Alier, 2012). Differences in land prices, wages, legal frameworks, regulatory contexts, and commercial opportunities make these countries attractive to companies, thus exacerbating inequality (Jara and Paz, 2013; Murmis and Murmis, 2012).

The conflicts arising from these land investments and the inequities created within and between countries are now being analysed and theorized by environmental justice scholars. When the field originally emerged in the late 1980s, the field of environmental justice studies primarily focused on the disproportionate environmental burden of land use activities on certain racial, vulnerable and marginalized groups in rich countries (Bullard, 1996). Subsequently, the field ex-

panded to give greater consideration to gender (Schlosberg, 2007), the Global South (Schlosberg, 2004), and to the hierarchies and inequalities within the disadvantaged groups (Parra and Moulaert, 2016). Nowadays, new insights have shifted the focus from only considering impacts on humans to also include impacts on the environment (Agyeman et al., 2016). This shift has also led to analysing the importance of a healthy environment for people (Lakes et al., 2014; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010).

Drawing on Schlosberg (2013), we define environmental injustice as the procedures, processes and systems that lead to the unequal distribution of the burdens, harms and risks associated with policies, plans, programs and projects that impact on the environment. To understand environmental injustice, many environmental justice scholars have focused on protest movements, collaborations between movements, and on the processes, claims and outcomes achieved by these movements (Carruthers, 2008; Sebastien, 2017; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010; Urkidi and Walter, 2011). Notably, the environmental justice field has shown how social transformative action can reduce environmental injustice, increase wellbeing in communities, and build social capital (Hanna et al., 2016b; Mehmood and Parra, 2013). Drawing on thinkers like Arturo Escobar, Paolo Freire, Ivan Illich, Boaventura de Sousa Santos and others, we define social transformative action as a wide variety of forms and processes of proactive organization that seek redress for injustice and/or that strive for a better world. The field of environmental justice has stressed the importance of social transformative action to achieve sustainability (Martínez-Alier, 2012).

There are many people who do not overtly resist while experiencing environmental injustice but may use a wide range of passive resistance strategies (Hanna et al., 2016b; Leguizamón, 2016; Scott, 1985). An explanation for their apparent lack of political engagement may be their shortage of financial resources or the inadequacies of the local setting, given that political engagement is resource intensive and may not lead to any significant outcome (Piñeiro et al., 2016). However, populist governments, such as many of the former governments in Argentina, can incentivise political engagement as a means of co-opting local people (Piñeiro et al., 2016). Alternatively, the awakening environmental and political awareness facilitated by land use change can trigger political action (Hanna, Langdon and Vanclay, 2016; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Narain, 2014; Sebastien, 2017). We consider that the environmental justice literature does not sufficiently examine the preconditions necessary to initiate social transformative action. Therefore, we seek to explore the factors that hinder the ability of communities to address injustice in the context of land grabbing in Argentina.

Some scholars have pointed to the importance of studying pre-existing inequalities, hidden processes, and place-based specificities (Carruthers, 2008; Coenen and Halfacre, 2003; Cook and Swyngedouw, 2012; Lakes et al., 2014; Lapegna, 2016; Schlosberg, 2013; Walker, 2009). Therefore,

the main questions discussed in this paper are: (1) How does the environmental justice field help us to understand the socio-environmental conflicts created by land grabbing?; (2) What are the social processes and mechanisms that enable or constrain social transformative action?; and (3) How does land grabbing force people to change or adapt their livelihoods and construct alternative livelihoods? Environmental justice is used as an analytical lens to examine how land grabbing has initiated different types of environmental injustice. We also bring in Nixon's (2011) ideas about violence, which goes further in assisting our understanding of what type injustices local people faced. We use material from two case studies in Argentina, one being the agricultural expansion in the Province of Santiago del Estero and the other the tree plantation expansion in the Province of Corrientes.

Our main conclusions are that in the face of advancing agribusiness, in both cases, the ability of many people to maintain their way of living was under threat. Under the influence of the neoliberalist ideology that has existed in Argentina since about the mid-1990s (Teubal, 2004), most rural communities are now in a state of social deprivation, with little government investment in roads, education, healthcare, or basic services like water and electricity (Bidaseca et al., 2013; Neiff, 2004). This pre-existing social deprivation and the impoverished conditions in which communities live exacerbate the severity of the impacts of land grabbing. However, people face a range of other issues that are of greater concern to them than these impacts, such as meeting basic needs, having reasonable working conditions, and adequate access to clean water, electricity, education, and healthcare. Instead of resisting, people tended to adapt their livelihoods and accommodated to environmental injustice resulting from land grabbing. This assists in the spread of land grabbing. The deprived situation in which people live means that people have less possibilities to access civil society groups to advance social transformative actions. These constraints to the dissemination of their environmental justice claims often relate to historical, geographical, judicial, financial, political and social factors.

## **4.2 Environmental injustice, resistance, protest and social transformative action**

Social transformative action, protest and resistance in response to environmental injustice come in many forms and range from overt, formally-organized group activities to covert informal 'weapons of the weak' (Hanna et al., 2016b; Scott, 1985; Urkidi and Walter, 2011). People may resist current or future environmental burdens, harms and risks. People may also desire redress for past harms in order to achieve closure and be able to move forward (Hanna, Langdon and Vanclay, 2016). Environmental justice claims tend to arise: when the environment in which people live is irreversibly modified in its quality and use value; when the possibility to access

common property resources is modified; when certain groups are not considered or do not benefit fairly; or when the capabilities of people are constrained because of land control and use changes (Bullard, 1996; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010).

Local environmental justice movements tend to work on local issues, the resolution of which requires action at the global as well as local level (Agyeman et al., 2016; Hanna et al., 2016b). These movements emphasise that environmental harms should not be situated in areas close to people, especially those who are more vulnerable (Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010). Environmental justice movements are also active in initiating debates about systemic change. For example, the *agro-ecología* (agro-ecological) movement in Latin America aims at transforming agriculture from its current strategy of large industrial monocultures to a more environmentally and socially-just system benefitting small family farmers (Altieri and Toledo, 2011).

Solidarity between organizations and scale-jumping (i.e. moving between spheres or levels of action from the local to the global) are important strategies to strengthen social and environmental campaigns and increase their likelihood of success (Cook and Swyngedouw, 2012; Hanna et al., 2016b; Parra, 2010; Urkidi and Walter, 2011). This is demonstrated by the *Unión Asamblea Ciudadana* (Citizens Assembly Union) in Argentina, which unites and supports local movements protesting against environmental conflicts. Within the *Unión*, learning is achieved through the sharing of experiences and tactics. The strength of the solidarity is communicated via social media and helps in spreading messages of resistance. Urkidi and Walter (2011) showed how local environmental justice movements in Argentina successfully engaged with national and international networks to pursue their claims.

Covert weapons of the weak are tactics that relatively powerless people may use like “foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance” to resist the policies, plans, programs and projects they oppose (Scott, 1985, 29). These people may have little option other than to stay in their communities, where they are often constrained in practicing overt action, requiring them to accommodate to the injustice they experience (Lapegna, 2016). Several factors limit the ability of local people to engage in overt resistance, including limited resources, a lack of access to information and external contacts, and uncertainty about responsibility and accountability for environmental hazards (Coenen and Halfacre, 2003; Lapegna, 2016). In our opinion, the factors that enable or constrain people to seek resolution of their environmental justice issues are not sufficiently understood.

Overt resistance has many characteristics and can lead to a wide range of outcomes. Resistance movements and other social movements have an important role to play in contributing to more sustainable and just societies (Hanna et al., 2016b; Martínez-Alier, 2012; Parra and Walsh, 2016;

Sebastien, 2017). Primarily, they provide hope and a prospect of a more just society which values nature (Martínez-Alier, 2012). Protest actions can increase community wellbeing, social capital and people's appreciation of their local environment (Hanna et al., 2014, 2016b; Imperiale and Vanclay 2016; Sebastien, 2017). Therefore, studying the reasons why people are limited in their ability to resist or to initiate social transformative action is important, especially in land grabbing where social and environmental impacts are severe.

### **4.3 Quick overview of the field of environmental justice studies**

Since the concept of environmental justice emerged in the 1980s in the United States, it has evolved considerably (Agyeman et al., 2016). The field has been used and shaped by environmental justice groups, social justice groups, civil society organizations, academics, politicians and practitioners (Agyeman et al., 2016; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010; Velicu and Kaika, 2015; Walker, 2009). How the concept is used or interpreted depends on the historical and geographical characteristics of specific localities (Velicu and Kaika, 2015). According to key writers, the main topics addressed in the field of environmental justice studies are: the unequal distribution of harms; the extent of participation in decision-making; procedural justice issues; recognition of and respect for local people and local cultures; and the Capability Approach (Agyeman et al., 2016; Bullard, 1996; Carruthers, 2008; Schlosberg, 2004; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010). Although additional topics have been suggested (Velicu and Kaika, 2015), this list provides a basis by which socio-environmental issues, including land grabbing, can be analysed, and we use these as the themes in our analysis in this paper. They are described in more detail immediately below.

The unequal distribution of environmental harms is the defining element of environmental justice. Problems around maldistribution are often localized issues that make certain marginalised groups and the most vulnerable people suffer disproportionately by inequitable exposure to environmental injustice. These groups typically include Indigenous communities, communities of colour, communities in poverty, immigrants, women, the elderly, and very young children (Agyeman et al., 2016; Darby, 2012; Krishnan and George, 2014; Laurian and Funderburg, 2014; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010; Tschakert, 2010; Walker, 2009). The distributional issues are initiated by and result in disrespect, discrimination, disempowerment, disintegration, despair and despondency (Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010; Tschakert, 2010). Environmental justice pays attention to intra-generational and inter-generational distribution, focusing on safeguarding current and future environmental sustainability (WCED, 1987).



Participation refers to the ability of people to have a say in decision-making processes about the society and economy in general, and about specific issues such as, for example, a new agribusiness operation in their neighbourhood (Dare and Vanclay, 2014). Ideally, participation should be fully and effectively implemented as normal procedure and as best represented by the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent, which arguably applies to Indigenous communities giving them the possibility to withhold or consent to proposed projects (Hanna and Vanclay, 2013). However, participatory practices as implemented have often been woefully inadequate, partly because people do not have equal power in the processes, and are sometimes not considered as being equal (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Velicu and Kaika, 2015). Local resistance and protest movements are increasingly refusing to participate in the limited consultation processes that are typically undertaken for projects that acquire land (Hanna et al., 2014; Kaika, 2017; Schlosberg, 2013). Another factor influencing participation is the risk associated with community involvement in certain projects (Gallagher and Jackson, 2008).

Procedural justice issues refers to the way procedures are implemented in practice. They should be applied in a manner consistent with the principles of transparency, accountability, equality, non-discrimination, and inclusion, and require that information about all possible environmental harms and risks be provided in a transparent, accessible way and in languages appropriate to the impacted peoples (Agyeman et al., 2016; Coenen and Halfacre, 2003; Hanna et al., 2014; Laurian and Funderburg, 2014; Schlosberg, 2004; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010).

The failure to respect other cultures, their ways of living and thinking, or to appreciate their non-static nature is also a form of environmental injustice. Sometimes, the connection people have with the places they inhabit is completely ignored by companies and/or the state. Other times, the perceived disconnection of these people with traditional ways of living is used as a justification to foist unwanted development on them. Modernization and exploitative modes of development are deemed more important than the wellbeing of local people (see Agyeman et al., 2016; Nixon, 2011; Parra and Moulaert, 2016).

Many environmental justice scholars use the Capability Approach (Schlosberg, 2013; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010; Tschakert, 2010), which was developed by Sen (1985) and Nussbaum and Sen (1993). The Capability Approach is a framework to identify and enhance the individual wellbeing, social arrangements and locational factors that enable people to live their life to its full potential (Sen, 1985). These factors include freedom of choice, opportunities linked with this freedom, and the ability to pursue these possibilities (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Environmental justice scholars are interested in this approach because changes in environmental quality affect people's livelihoods and ultimately their wellbeing, thus changing the conditions that allow people to develop and pursue their capabilities (Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010).

## 4.4 Land grabbing as environmental injustice

This section describes the phenomenon of increasing land investments and its consequences for people and places. Land grabbing is “the capturing of control of relatively vast tracts of land and other natural resources through a variety of mechanisms and forms involving large-scale capital that often shifts resource use to that of extraction, whether for international or domestic purposes” (Borras et al., 2012, 405). Land grabbing is facilitated by unclear land tenure arrangements and it itself leads to competing claims over land (del Huerto Díaz Habra and Franzzini, 2016). Land grabbing primarily impacts smallholders (Banerjee, 2015). It leads to a wide range of outcomes including various forms of resistance, protest, rural-to-urban migration (Jara et al., 2016), communities that are surrounded or cut off (Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016; del Huerto Díaz Habra and Franzzini, 2016; Narain, 2014), displacement and resettlement (Vanclay, 2017), and in the worst cases, even though a breach of human rights, to the violent dispossession and forced eviction of people (Grajales, 2011).

Land grabbing changes the normal life rhythm of communities (Lapegna, 2016). Local people are typically rooted in the places where they live, and the disruption caused by land grabbing can be momentous (Baker and Mehmood, 2015; Grajales, 2011; Narain, 2014). This situation is unfair in that companies are ‘globally mobile’, whereas local people are fixed in place and have few alternatives for making their living (Desmarais, 2002). The forced adaptation of local people to land use change and their context-specific prior disadvantages mean that they may not be able to organize or resist (Lapegna, 2016). Land use change may even result in communal conflict as the desires and interests in communities are diverse (Hall et al., 2015). The disadvantages they experience include geographical isolation, financial constraints, and limited knowledge about their legal rights and the judicial system (Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016; del Huerto Díaz Habra and Franzzini, 2016). These place-based specificities are not sufficiently addressed in the field of environmental justice studies (Schlosberg, 2004; 2013).

## 4.5 The violence inherent within land grabbing

Nixon (2011) distinguished between actual, structural, and slow violence. All three types occur in conjunction with land grabbing. Actual violence “is event focused, time bound and body bound” (Nixon, 2011, 3). Around the world, every year thousands of rural people and land activist are attacked or criminalized, and hundreds are murdered because of their actions against land grabbing (Global Witness, 2016; GRAIN, 2016; Grajales, 2011; Jara and Paz, 2013; Lapegna, 2012; Sassen, 2017; Stover, 2016).

Structural violence refers to a deterioration or denial of human needs that could have been prevented if the political or social settings were more equal and just (Galtung, 1969). An example of structural violence is reflected in the high morbidity and mortality rates of certain vulnerable groups (Galtung, 1969; Ho, 2007). Structural violence is an inadvertent outcome of neoliberalism and other processes, affecting local communities with local people not benefiting from the corporate-oriented economic model (see Desmarais, 2002; Nixon, 2011). This type of violence is covert, and can act as a catalyst for actual overt violence (Nixon, 2011, 10).

Slow violence is understood as the long-term, insidious negative effects of human activities on other human beings or the environment, especially the negative consequences that are not known, are invisible, or overlooked (Nixon, 2011). In the context of land grabbing, first, people lose access to land. However, the subsequent processes and outcomes, like deforestation, land use change and reduction in water availability, cause other negative effects in the present (e.g. displacement, impoverishment) and in the future (e.g. climate change) (see for example Cernea, 1997; Malhi et al., 2008). A specific example of slow violence is the cumulative effects on the health of workers in the agricultural industries (Leguizamón, 2016; Ogut et al., 2015; Séralini et al., 2013). Another example is reduced water availability, one of the consequences of tree plantations, which causes major livelihood impacts and consequent hardships on local people (Overbeek et al., 2012). The focus on slow violence is particularly relevant to the field of environmental justice because slow violence is “a major threat multiplier; it can fuel long-term, proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded” (Nixon, 2011, 3). Unfortunately, in land investments there is a lack of attention given to long term issues and/or to cumulative impacts (i.e. slow violence) (Jijelava and Vanclay, 2017; Vanclay, 2017). “Violence, above all environmental violence, needs to be seen – and deeply considered – as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labour, or resources, but also over time” (Nixon, 2011, 8).

## 4.6 Land grabbing in Argentina

In Argentina, there are three types of actors who have a key role in the process of land grabbing, especially in the agricultural sector (Murmis and Murmis, 2012). First, and most obviously, are the companies (foreign or domestic) that buy or lease land. The second important type comprises the rural elite (i.e. the historic formal title holders or landed gentry), who are typically absentee land owners not using the land. The demand for land has increased land values to such a point that this rural elite, who previously were happy to hang on to their holdings, now aspire to selling off the land (Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016). Third, the state plays an important role in facilitating land grabbing by, for example, lowering entry barriers for foreign investors, privatizing public

(state) land and authorizing deforestation (Costantino, 2015).

According to the NGO, GRAIN (2012), foreigners have grabbed one million hectares of land in Argentina. It is estimated that around nine million hectares are subject to some sort of dispute over land, affecting over 63,000 people (Bidaseca et al., 2013). The Civil Code (*Código Civil y Comercial de la Nación*) in Argentina recognises both formal title holders and the informal use of land. In Argentina, many historic formal title holders have not been actively using their land and, as a result, this land has been occupied and/or utilised by people from neighbouring communities and/or by migrants from further afield. Articles 4015 and 4016 of the Civil Code and Article 24 of Law 14,159 stipulate that informal land users can initiate a legal procedure (commonly known as *Ley Veinteañal*) to gain formal land title to a piece of land after they have lived there continuously for a minimum of 20 years, even if there was previously assigned formal title over that land (Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016). Communities can also start this legal procedure when they possess informal use rights on public land. However, this *Ley Veinteañal* procedure is not well known among rural people. The steps necessary to start this procedure are relatively costly and time-consuming, which is a major disincentive to them pursuing this option. In extreme cases, the judicial process of claiming rights on public land on the basis of the *Ley Veinteañal* can take up to 20 years. The steps include having to take GPS coordinates of the land being used. Furthermore, even if they take all the necessary steps, the implementation of this law is not always done properly by the state (Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016; del Huerto Díaz Habra and Franzzini, 2016; Jara et al., 2016). The underutilisation of land by the historic formal title holders and its occupation/utilisation by others leads to contestation over the title, and potentially to legal claims to the title. This tension tends to persist for many years, creating long-term insecurity (Bidaseca et al., 2013; Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016; Jara and Paz, 2013).

Historically, the uncertainty over land tenure was perhaps not a major issue for most stakeholders. However, the contemporary demand for land driven by land grabbing had made it a significant issue. Historic formal title holders who may previously not have been too worried about losing their land by *Ley Veinteañal* claims now have been very concerned to protect their ownership rights so that they can then sell (or lease) their land to the land grabbers. Thus, to thwart the *Ley Veinteañal* procedure, they have had to re-occupy/utilise the land themselves, and they have had to exclude the squatters from their land. Sometimes they have sold their land, with the informal users still in place, leaving the land investor with the issue. In the Argentinian context, the sale of land and a change in land title does not extinguish pre-existing claims to the land, such as might be generated by the *Ley Veinteañal* procedure (Personal communication with government official, 2017).

The tactics frequently used by the historic formal title holders and land investors to pressure

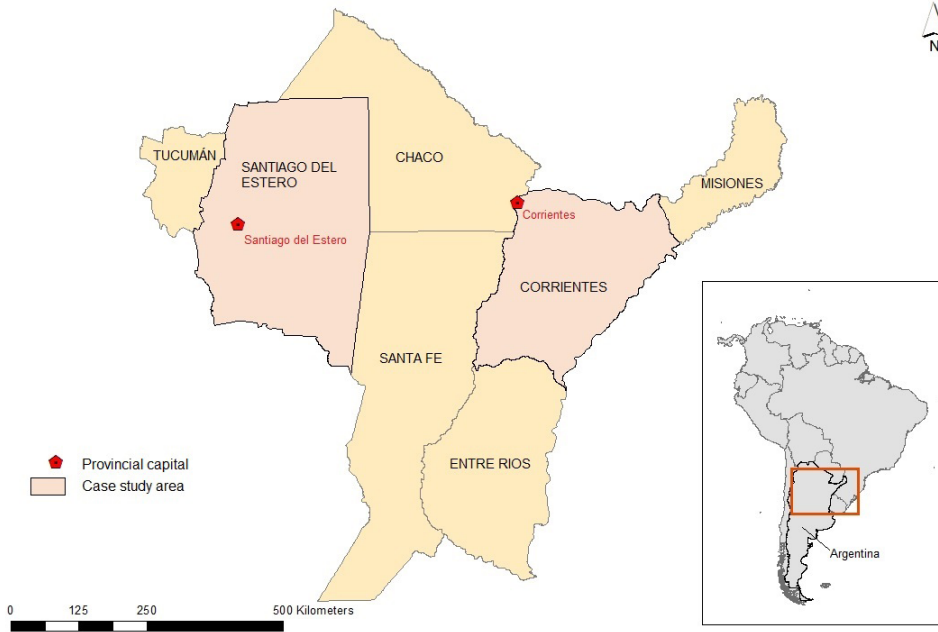
people to leave the land include: menacing actions, such as with bulldozers or other equipment; the use of private security forces; intimidatory behaviour and harassment, such as setting houses on fire; the illegal or unauthorised occupation and/or use of land by the investors; and the bribing of local police and judicial staff to facilitate their complicity (Jara and Paz, 2013), all of which are breaches of human rights (van der Ploeg and Vanclay, 2017). At the national level, there are laws intended to protect people against expulsion and, specifically, to protect Indigenous peoples (i.e. Law 26.160) (Bidaseca et al., 2013), however these are not adequate to provide the necessary protections, especially in the context of the state being complicit in the land grabbing (which is part of its national development strategy) (Jara and Paz, 2013; Costantino, 2015).

## 4.7 Methodology

Land use changes and conflicts in Argentina were studied by examining two rural regions (i.e. case studies), the Provinces of Santiago del Estero and Corrientes (see Figure 1), which were subject to much land investment. In Santiago del Estero, there has been a massive expansion of industrial agriculture, especially soy, because of the passing in 1996 of a national law allowing GMOs (Goldfarb and Zoomers, 2013). The shift in agricultural production trends has also led to a major increase in feedlotting and extensive livestock farming in this province (Jara and Paz, 2013). In Corrientes, there has been a major expansion of industrial tree plantations (Slutzky, 2014). The expansion of industrial agriculture and tree plantations throughout Argentina has been particularly problematic for local communities and has led to much conflict over land use and concern about security of land tenure (Bidaseca et al., 2013). In the two provinces studied, many smallholders reside in situations of informal title or precarious land tenure (Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016; Jara and Paz, 2013; Slutzky, 2014). The expansion of industrial agriculture and plantation forestry typically ousts people off the land and/or severely disrupts their livelihoods (Goldfarb and van der Haar, 2016; Jara and Paz, 2013; Lapegna, 2016).

The insights presented in this paper, which is part of a larger project, are based on a total of 10 months of fieldwork in Argentina carried out between 2011 and 2016. In 2011 (October-December), fieldwork was conducted with the assistance of a local non-governmental organization (NGO) in Santiago del Estero. The purpose of this NGO is to assist communities to enhance their viability and vitality, and it provides support in relation to land conflicts. The collaboration with this NGO gave a broad understanding of the political, judicial and social issues relating to land grabbing. In 2014, two months (November-December) were spent in Argentina doing preliminary investigations and gaining an overarching perspective, with a couple of weeks in Buenos Aires interviewing key informants. In 2015 (April-July), fieldwork was primarily conducted in Corrientes. In 2016 (April-May), research was primarily conducted in Santiago del Estero. During

these fieldwork periods, supportive information was gained from fieldtrips to other provinces like Misiones, Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Jujuy, Santa Fe and Tucumán.



**FIGURE 1.** Map of Argentina, with Santiago del Estero and Corrientes highlighted.

Source: Author

While the larger project looked at the socio-environmental consequences of land acquisition in Argentina, the aim of this particular paper was to consider the potential value of an environmental justice perspective in analysing land acquisition processes. To achieve this aim, a multi-methods approach was adopted, with a wide range of social research methods used, including: document analysis (especially of documents pertaining to the case study area); analysis of media reports; in-depth interviews with key informants; and participant observation with field visits and attendance at village meetings where land use issues and land tenure were being discussed. For the overarching project, some 70 interviews were done. For this paper, we drew on the participant observation and 47 of the interviews that related specifically to the two case study regions. These 47 interviews included: 10 interviews with local residents, 10 with representatives of NGOs, 7 with representatives of companies, 8 with other researchers studying land grabbing, and 12 interviews with government officials. The purpose of these interviews was to get a good in-depth understanding of the characteristics and specificities of the study area, land

grabbing practices, adaptation strategies, obstacles to resistance, and policies related to land use change. All interviews were conducted by the lead author in Spanish. For some interviews, the second author was also present.

The quotes used in this paper have been translated into English by the authors. In translating the quotes, we have ensured that the inherent or implied meaning was preserved, rather than necessarily providing the exact literal translation. Informed consent was given for the interviews, although usually in an informal way (Vanclay et al., 2013). Only about half of the interviews could be recorded because of people's concerns about this, although they were happy to talk to the interviewer(s) and for interview notes to be taken. The interviews that were recorded were transcribed. After each interview, especially for those that were not recorded, additional notes were made regarding any significant observation or comments made. In some interviews, participants presented photos, documents or other materials. Where appropriate, the researchers took copies of these, made photographs, or took notes about them.

In addition to interviews, several meetings relating to tenure insecurity were attended in different villages. One of these was a workshop for members of a community facing eviction. It was organised by a group of students from the University of Misiones, who arranged for a lawyer specialized in land tenure to attend and give general advice. The aim of the workshop was to assist the community to formalize their land tenure and thus avert eviction. Another example is attending meetings between communities, the church and NGO staff in which another lawyer informed people about their land rights. A further example in Santiago del Estero was attendance at a meeting of 'Mesa Provincial de Tierra' (Provincial Roundtable for Land Issues), a formal mechanism that gathers together the different actors involved in land use conflicts. Field visits included visiting soy and tree plantations accompanied by the owners. All research activities contributed to gaining an integrated view of the implications of land grabbing and the local realities surrounding this.

The data for analysis comprised the interview transcripts, relevant documents, and field notes and our deliberations on these. Analysis of the data was done by reviewing all materials many times over and distilling the key issues relating to land grabbing and environmental justice issues. A limitation of this research is that the lead researcher was only able to visit communities that had external connections, as she was typically introduced to these communities through gatekeepers such as various NGOs in Argentina. This may have influenced the findings, because the research is only of communities that are reasonably well-connected and well-functioning. Other limitations related to language nuance, given the strong regional dialects in some of the rural villages. Statements about specific facts, events or happenings were cross-checked or triangulated as much as possible.

## 4.8 Description of the two case studies

### ***Agricultural production in Santiago del Estero***

The key products of Santiago del Estero are grain, maize and soy (INDEC, 2016; Jara and Paz, 2013). Argentina is currently the world's third largest producer of soy, with rapid expansion taking place. Nationally, soy covered 19.8 million hectares in 2014 (Leguizamón, 2016), up from 5 million in 1990 (Ministry of Agroindustry, 2017). Although the cultivation of soy primarily takes place in the provinces of Buenos Aires and Córdoba (Jara and Paz, 2013), the area sown is rapidly increasing in Santiago del Estero from 72,500 hectares in 1990 to just under 1 million hectares in 2014 (Ministry of Agroindustry, 2017). The further expansion of soy in both Argentina and Santiago del Estero is likely, as the demand for soy for food and biofuel is predicted to increase (Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, 2010).

The expansion of soy cultivation in Buenos Aires and Córdoba has led to the relocation of livestock industries (i.e. feedlots) from these provinces to Santiago del Estero, which now has over 1 million head of cattle, resulting in odour emissions, pollution, land conflict and deforestation (interview government official, 2016; see also Boletta et al., 2006; Leguizamón, 2014).

The expansion of agricultural industries is accompanied by processes of deforestation, ecosystem degradation, land grabs, and the extensive use of harmful chemicals (Costantino, 2015; Elgert, 2015; Goldfarb and Zoomers, 2013; Leguizamón, 2016). Santiago del Estero forms part of the Gran Chaco region, "one of the most active deforestation frontiers in the world" (Leguizamón, 2016, 687). Illegal deforestation is not uncommon, however, the provincial forest management agency has limited capacity to prevent it (Interview government official, 2016).

Santiago del Estero is the province in Argentina with the greatest number of violent conflicts over land, and the insecure land tenure situation has been an issue for decades (Bidaseca et al., 2013). The social movement *Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero* (MOCASE) (Peasant movement of Santiago del Estero) has been at the forefront in addressing land tenure issues (Jara and Paz, 2013). In recent times, these conflicts have intensified (Leguizamón, 2014). There are confirmed incidences of the killing of peasants, violent confrontations with smallholders, and other inappropriate actions by private security firms (Bidaseca et al., 2013; Jara and Paz, 2013; Lapegna, 2012; Leguizamón, 2016).

### ***Tree plantations in Corrientes***

Corrientes has seen an increase in the area of land under tree plantations with 450,000 hectares of plantations in 2014 (Provincia de Corrientes, 2014). The provincial government intends that the amount of land allocated to plantations will increase by around 53,000 hectares an-



nually (Plan Estratégico Forestoindustrial Corrientes, 2010). The government is very supportive of this expansion, not only setting a very ambitious target of 1 million hectares to be planted by 2025 – about 12 percent of the total land area of Corrientes! – but also publicly flagging that up to 4 million hectares are potentially suitable for industrial tree plantations (Provincia de Corrientes, 2014). Due to its geographical features such as rainfall, water availability, low elevation, climate and the fertility of the soil, Corrientes is promoted as one of the most suitable regions in the world for pine and eucalyptus plantations (Provincia de Corrientes, 2014). Worldwide, tree plantations are associated with the high use of agrochemicals, ecological damage, excessive water use, land conflict, an increased risk of fire, loss of livelihoods, and poor working conditions (Gerber et al., 2009; Overbeek et al., 2012; Slutzky, 2013).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, more so than other areas of Argentina, the rural areas of Corrientes exhibited a feudal-like class structure, with concentrated land ownership and a strong rural elite (Slutzky, 2014). Historical cultural acceptance of this feudal structure partially explains why there are only few well-organized initiatives of resistance. Nevertheless, one of the most active NGOs in the Province is *Guardianes del Iberá*. This NGO highlights the concerns associated with land tenure that arise because of the arrival of the agriculture and forestry industries. They also draw attention to the negative impacts of tree plantations by, for example, demonstrations in the capital city, Corrientes.

## 4.9 Environmental and social injustice from land grabbing: findings from the field

### ***Pre-existing injustice***

It was evident that there was a limited access to essential public services in the study areas, including a lack of access to electricity and limited access to (potable) water. While the lack of electricity can potentially be addressed by the installation of solar panels, there are few options available for the provision of safe drinking water, except for buying bottled water. Because of the cost and inconvenience of bottled water, many poor people in Santiago del Estero consumed water from local wells, which is often not fit for human consumption because of naturally-occurring arsenic (see Bhattacharya et al., 2006). Another difficulty in remote areas is the limited access to secondary education and the poor quality of education in general. School attendance is often low because of the distance to school, especially with the extreme weather conditions often experienced. Furthermore, children are often required to work in the fields. This results in high levels of functional illiteracy. The problem is compounded because these rural areas are not attractive to teachers and it is hard for rural schools to attract and retain quality staff. Because of the lack of capacity in the education system generally, and especially because of

the inadequate monitoring of schools and teaching staff, in some rural areas teachers frequently abscond. The lack of access to essential public services severely disadvantages rural people.

The poor quality of the rural roads, limited ownership of private vehicles, and the limited availability of public transport restricted the ability of rural people to advance their claims. Another inequality was the limited cell phone reception in remote areas. Moreover, rural people were vulnerable to climate change effects like heat waves, drought, and excessive rainfall. The ability to have regular work was challenging. Where people did work, it was often temporary, seasonal, based on subcontracting arrangements, and frequently under poor working conditions. Many people in the study areas lived from subsistence farming activities together with various forms of state benefit (welfare payments). There were many factors that restricted people in physically accessing the formal decision-making spheres. Even where they had access, the procedures were not always easy for rural people to follow. Overall, there was a strong historical marginalization of rural people that comes about from their geographical setting as well as from urban-rural bias that exists in all things. These characteristics of remote areas in Argentina are consistent with remote communities in most places in the world.

### ***Injustice brought about by land grabbing***

The increasing interest in land brings insecurity for local people, as they face the possibility of being displaced and dispossessed, expelled from their homes, and severed from their livelihoods. An important land issue in Argentina is the large extent of informal occupancy. Companies buying land tend not to be aware that formal land title does not necessarily imply vacant possession, as expressed in the following quote from a government official:

“Selling and buying land is a business ... you do not even have to visit the land to buy it, you can buy it based on photos or satellite images ... Basically, land sales are based on presumptions. When the buyer actually arrives at the site, it may be full of people. This is where conflict arises. People who buy a formal title have the economic ability to buy [the land] and to hire a surveyor, engineer, and a lawyer, and can gain permission from the forest management agency to start clearing [the land]. Rural people, however, live in the middle of nowhere, they raise goats, work as woodcutters, or they go to other provinces to seek an income ... they do not have the financial means to hire a lawyer [to defend their rights]. It has always been difficult for them to have access to justice. There is an economic obstacle to being able to reach it. These people are living ‘the quiet life’. Gaining land title is not high on their agenda. It only becomes part of their agenda when conflict has started. This complicates this issue.”

There is limited knowledge by rural communities about their land rights. This issue is being tack-

led by some NGOs that organize workshops on this and related topics. However, because of their limited financial means and because formalization of land title is not seen as an immediate issue, most rural people do not take action to formalise their land occupancy. In the words of one interviewee: “we have possession rights, but to gain formal titles we need money for the [GPS] measurements, the surveyor and a lawyer. But money is what we have least ... I know that one day we will have a problem with the land [titles] [but for now we have other things to worry about]” (Interview smallholder, 2016).

A complexity in the process of formalizing land use is the disorganized state of the land registry office. It is often the case that rural communities live on land belonging to a formal title holder who is not easily identifiable. This is problematic in their attempts to implement the *Ley Veinteañal* procedure, which requires the identification and active involvement of the formal land holder. Another complexity is that rural people have to deal with an institutional setting that strongly favours large-scale land use and actively discourages or suppresses the *Ley Veinteañal* procedure. Even if people achieve this, women are usually left disadvantaged as titling is predominantly done in the name of the men, creating problems in cases of land sale or divorce (Interview land registry, 2015).

The demand for land and the high returns that are now possible from it result in people engaging in various forms of malpractice, including falsifying papers and bribing officials (see also Jara and Paz, 2013). Moreover, staff from the land registry office, real estate agencies, and middle-men can be involved in illicit or dubious actions that facilitate land sales. One of our interviewees (Interview real estate agency, 2015) mentioned that laws are not respected [in Corrientes] when it comes to monitoring the area of land foreigners can own. It was stated in another interview (Interview government official, 2016) that there were cases where land was bought illegally or as a result of intimidation of the informal settlers.

Land grabbing for tree plantations brings about many other issues. For example, in Corrientes, some specific issues include diminished work opportunities, reduced water availability, increased risk of fire, and poor labour conditions. One smallholder vegetable producer articulated many of the impacts the tree plantations were having on her and her community.

“We cannot compete [with the companies in buying land]. They offer a lot ... and it is very tempting [for the villagers to sell out] ... The company might leave the house intact but will grow plantations right up to the house. I don't like that they are taking the land. ... Close to my house, there is a plantation of 150 hectares ... before it was a beautiful field. You have no idea how beautiful it was! ... Now, some of the lagoons have dried out [because of the plantations] ... There are not so many work opportunities

in the region anymore. People are leaving because of that ... It only takes 2 people to manage 1,000 hectares of plantation. Here on my 15 hectares, I provide work for 10 people ... [With the plantations] there are no more possibilities to expand my farm or to use other plots of land to let the soil rest and recover [fallow]. ... Another issue is water availability. We need to construct [new and deep] wells to be able to irrigate, we need equipment for this but this is expensive ... for the big producers these costs are okay, but for smallholders, it is a lot of money ... Maybe in a few years, the situation will change [and more work will come]. But I am afraid of the sawmills, because many people are injured or die working there.”

Another issue brought by land grabbing is that when strangers come, people’s feelings of trust and safety change. During fieldwork, several families reported that they experienced conflict with the new land owners. These conflicts included cases of animals being killed when they would wander into the new owner’s paddocks.

Yet another issue was increased exposure to agrochemicals arising from changed land use. People were not sufficiently aware of the risks associated with agrochemical use, and they engaged in behaviours that increased their exposure. For example, farm workers did not always follow the mixing instructions, did not always wear protective clothing, and did not properly dispose of the containers. Communities were exposed by spray drift and over spraying, as well as by residues getting into their drinking water. Given the long-term harmful effects of the chemicals, the spraying of agrochemicals can be seen as both instant and slow violence.

Although there are chemical company stated procedures and Argentinian regulations (usually varying by province), typically including withholding periods and distances from houses and watercourses, they are not observed or policed. One interviewee, a medical doctor and health advocate for rural people, told us that rural schools were routinely being sprayed by crop-dusters. He indicated that children were especially susceptible to the negative health impacts from agrochemicals.

Slow violence is insidiously experienced by local people in a number of other ways including diminished access to water, increased pollution of the environment with possible detrimental health effects in the future, climate change, and diminished livelihood options. These collectively and progressively result in a declining situation in which living conditions and general wellbeing deteriorate to such an extent as to be almost unliveable.

## 4.10 Strategies and social transformative actions used by rural communities to cope with land grabbing

In this section, we distil the main strategies local people use to cope with and adapt to land grabbing. We have developed this list partly from our literature review, especially Goldfarb and van der Haar (2016), del Huerto Díaz Habra and Franzzini (2016), and Jara et al. (2016), and partly from our field observations. We identified five main strategies that can be used individually or collectively, sometimes with NGO support, which we describe below.

The first (and arguably strongest) is legal action and other forms of proactive organisation local people can use to formally defend and maintain access to land in the face of dispossession. Specifically, they can initiate *Ley Veinteañal* procedures to gain formal land title. They can also advocate for greater respect for informal land use (both on government as well as on private land) and for easier access to and operation of the *Ley Veinteañal* procedure. To draw attention to these issues, they can initiate a wide variety of protest actions.

The second strategy is proactive organization to improve the livelihood strategies and wellbeing of the rural community, and to engage in various forms of capacity building to improve the background conditions of the community so that they are better able to fight for their rights and to gain land title. A further dimension of this strategy is to enhance the capacities and ability of people to claim formal title. This includes collecting proof such as school enrolment data to establish the period of time spend in the locality, the marking of important locations like graves or ritualistic structures, and mapping and fencing to demarcate land claims. NGOs conduct workshops with local communities to increase their awareness of their rights, and how to act in ways that enhance their ability to claim their rights.

The third strategy is for local communities to negotiate with the historic formal title holders or intending buyer to secure formal title over a small proportion of the land on the condition that that they would not pursue a claim over the larger piece of land – in other words, to do a deal with the land owner.

The fourth strategy is to sell out (accept a payment) and vacate the land. This is sometimes done under duress, or because of a perception that there is likely to be no better option. One of our interviewees mentioned that, in her community, out of necessity due to rising costs at the time, many people had already sold out. The process of selling out fuels rural to urban migration.

The fifth strategy for rural people to cope with the land use changes is one of accommodation, basically to adapt their lives and adjust to the changes brought about by land grabbing. In this

strategy, people do experience many negative impacts, but generally consider that they do not have the possibility to overtly resist. Livelihood adaptation and accommodation is clearly reflected in the comments made to us by one smallholder who was impacted by the agricultural expansion that was slowly closing in on her community, diminishing her opportunities to maintain her livelihood activities. Because of the diminished land access she experienced by being forced out by the land grabbers, there was not enough feed for her animals, and consequently she had to reduce her herd of goats by half. In time, and out of necessity, together with a local small-scale farmers' association, this issue was addressed by establishing a small-scale animal feed manufacturing facility which could produce sufficient product to feed the livestock of the entire community – thus a shift from open grazing to trough feeding (Interview smallholder, 2016).

An important enabling mechanism for communities to initiate social transformative action is to connect with other people, communities, the church, NGOs, and other institutions. It was observed that, where local people were connected with people in capital cities, the options, likelihood and effectiveness of their efforts improved considerably. However, even though there were various assistance programs available, funded and/or run by various NGOs or public sector agencies, these programs were often inadequate and did not sufficiently address the needs of rural communities. One issue is that most agencies and NGOs are only able to act in response to an issue and after conflict has started; prevention of land conflicts is not their priority. Given the inadequate nature of the assistance, the inevitable outcome is that the interests of the rural communities are not protected, and rural people are rendered landless.

The various strategies described above all have limitations. Primarily, negotiations always take place in an unequal power arena. Furthermore, the state actively facilitates land grabbing as a development strategy and does not adequately protect its peoples. Where people are able to stay in their houses and retain some access to land, it is rare that they have access to the same piece of land as before, and while they may retain access to some land, it is seldom of the same total area or quality, thus they are made worse off. Even where they gain formal title, there are further complications, for example, land taxes and other charges need to be paid. The changes in land use practices alter the way people interact, which frequently leads to a loss of social cohesion, and can exacerbate pre-existing tensions in the community.

## 4.11 Conclusion

Land grabbing and land use change are a serious threat to the effective functioning and wellbeing of local communities. The operationalisation of land grabbing, injustice and slow violence is co-produced by the state, particularly with its endorsement of land grabbing as a development

strategy. Our paper has shown that, as a result of the expansion of land grabbing, vulnerable people in rural areas in Argentina face disproportionate environmental injustice and experience various forms of violence. Inequitable distribution, participation, procedural justice, and respect and recognition of difference are key issues in the land grabbing discourse. Local inequalities and specificities influence the differential distribution of benefits and harms, with some local people benefitting and others not. Thus, land grabbing actively creates social exclusion.

Pre-existing injustices exacerbate the impacts of land grabbing. The difficulties and injustices people face include the lack of basic needs, especially food, water, income, mobility, work, education, healthcare and adequate housing. Locational specificities influence the possibilities to protest against environmental injustice. This can lead to some people having to become almost accepting of environmental and social injustice. The possibilities to perform social transformative action depend on many things like the political setting, remoteness, available resources, access to information, and external contacts (see also Coenen and Halfacre, 2003; Lapegna, 2016). Some people affected by land grabbing can still take strong action to defend their interests, while others feel that they have little choice but to acquiesce.

We consider that land grabbing is a form of slow violence because it leads to a vast range of negative social impacts that are largely ignored or denied by most stakeholders, often including the impacted people themselves. In general, there is a lack of consideration of the health and wellbeing of the environment and of rural communities, as well as of the different meanings attached to nature by the different stakeholders. Slow violence is frequently not addressed by rural communities, partly because of its insidious nature, but also because of the difficulties they face, and because the changes invoked are often invisible, sometimes irreversible, as well as the perception that nothing can be done. However, we argue that local communities should not be considered as being powerless, rather that the power they inherently have cannot be sufficiently activated because of various local specificities. Depending on how opportunities play out in the future, local people may change their perceptions of their options and strategies, and the likely effectiveness of these strategies will also change.

Social and environmental justice movements assist in the fight for justice and inclusion. A more just and sustainable society will occur only through the efforts of the people who stand up for the environment and for a fairer society (Kaika, 2017; Martínez-Alier, 2012). There are many aspects that need to be addressed in order to facilitate and support these people. In particular, they need financial resources and agency to be heard and to propagate their claims. Another important ingredient in a fairer society is greater recognition of the informal use of land by local communities. This recognition would help local people strengthen their place in society by improving their livelihoods and by assisting individuals to reach their full potential as human beings

(Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010). Investing in essential public services and basic needs such as water, housing, education, roads, healthcare, reasonable work and working conditions would improve social equality. Moreover, investing in essential public services would allow for better political engagement in land related issues by a wider range of people (Jara et al., 2016). Social transformative action has the potential to redress environmental injustice and to address some of the malpractices brought about by land grabbing.



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