

Evaluation of GRAIN's work on land grabbing

External evaluation for:
Swedbio (Sweden), OxfamNovib (the Netherlands) and Misereor (Germany)

Executive summary and recommendations

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Executive Summary

This external evaluation (undertaken between April and June 2012) was commissioned by three of GRAIN's donors: Misereor (Germany), OxfamNovib (the Netherlands) and Swedbio (Sweden). It covers the period 2008 – 2011, and focuses primarily on GRAIN's work on land grabbing, begun in 2008. The review included all GRAIN's outputs on this issue in English, Spanish and French.

The main objective of the evaluation was to assess the relevance and impact of the land-grabbing work, and provide options and suggestions for GRAIN's future priorities and strategies in this area. A second objective was to assess GRAIN's organisation structure, building on a capacity assessment commissioned by OxfamNovib in 2008.

This period under review has been a dramatic one for GRAIN. On one hand, it was very gratifying, culminating in it being awarded the Right Livelihood Award in 2011 for its "*worldwide work to protect the livelihoods and rights of farming communities and to expose the massive purchases of farmland in developing countries by foreign financial interests*". But it was also a financially difficult period, due to the loss of one funding mechanism that was closed down and other donors lowering their contributions. This led, during 2010 and 2011, to the cutting of half the staff positions, leaving GRAIN by the end of 2011 with just eight staff dispersed around the world, only five of these full-time.

The evaluation focussed on seven key issues:

1. *Relevance* of GRAIN's focus on land grabbing
2. *Assessment of specific outputs*, capacity building and cooperation with social movements, outreach to and work with the media
3. *Outcome and impact* of GRAIN's work on land grabbing
4. *Effectiveness and efficiency*, that is, the scale of GRAIN's impact given its size and resources
5. *Sustainability* of GRAIN's involvement in the field
6. *Future priorities and strategies*
7. *Organisational issues*, a minor part of the evaluation, but particularly an examination of GRAIN's decentralized structure, financial limitations and sustainability

The main conclusion of this evaluation is that, as its receiving the Rights Livelihood Award indicated, GRAIN has been extremely effective in its mission to expose the risks of land grabbing,

and equally efficient in doing so with very limited human and financial resources. The influence that this small team has had on the global debate on land grabbing is nothing short of remarkable.

GRAIN both launched and effectively framed the global debate on what it labelled “land grabbing”, terminology that has stuck despite efforts by the World Bank and others to neutralize the debate with more benign terminology. GRAIN is almost unanimously credited as the organisation that drew the world’s attention to the phenomenon, exposing the neo-liberal factors that drive it and linking it to the industrialisation and financialisation of the food and farming system and how these threaten food sovereignty.

The impacts of GRAIN’s work have been felt in several fields and at various levels, generating many new research programs focussing on the trend and also drawing attention to the gender dimensions of land grabbing. Through the information and analysis that GRAIN provides, and with its direct support to international social movements, regional networks and national organisations, GRAIN has helped strengthen capacity for resistance and mobilisation against land grabbing. Some credit GRAIN with slowing down the trend because of the effectiveness of its arguments detailing the risks and the opposition it has helped mobilise. Proponents of this form of “agricultural investment”, however, blame GRAIN for the effectiveness of its opposition to it and note how much time and energy they have invested trying to counter its arguments.

The very wide “uptake” of the issue by other actors shows strong momentum, which GRAIN helped to build, and through its highly credible work on land grabbing, GRAIN too has become better known and respected in many circles. This should provide GRAIN with improved and new opportunities for generating new resources and support, although these have yet to be explored.

Demands on and expectations of GRAIN have risen steadily largely because of its work on land grabbing and its newfound “fame” (with mainstream media, for example). At the same time, reduced financial resources have caused GRAIN to make difficult cutbacks and decisions, including putting its magazine “*Seedling*” on hold and closing its offices and letting its staff go in Asia and Anglophone Africa. There is a clear correlation between the impact of GRAIN’s outputs and capacity building in a region and its presence there (as in Francophone Africa and in Latin America), and there is strong demand from civil society groups for GRAIN to try to increase its representation and the availability / accessibility of its information outputs around the world.

There is a need for GRAIN to consider a range of ways of coping with its reduced resources, such as prioritising its programme areas to balance its ambitions with its capacity and thus ensure its continued effectiveness and protect against staff burn out. As the current evaluation has not reviewed GRAIN’s work in all these areas, this report cannot offer recommendations on what the appropriate balance may look like.

Alternatively or at the same time, GRAIN could make a concerted effort to tap into new sources of funding. It is rightfully proud of its low-profile modesty, putting its collaborators and beneficiaries first, but it may now need to consider a range of options to make the organisation itself more visible online. This could involve new communications, outreach and fund-raising strategies, and possibly soliciting donations using its online presence and exploring the potential of social media. At a time when there is increasing competition for fewer and fewer donor funds, GRAIN needs to nurture its relationships with its current donors and also seek new and sustainable sources of revenue to ensure that the impacts of its important work can be maximised and the links between land grabbing and GRAIN’s broader agenda of promoting sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty can be better exposed.

Recommendations

Future priorities and strategies

The future role of GRAIN on the issue of land grabbing

1. Continue and develop at least some aspects of the very important and valued work on land grabbing (maintaining and continuing to update the farmlandgrab.org website, delving into emerging issues as the land grabbing evolves, documenting successful resistance strategies, conflicts, cancelled deals, etc.). This could include examining and developing clear definitions for the terminology that GRAIN uses.
2. Continue to analyse and expose new trends and the financial system that drive the industrialisation of agriculture and privatisation of public goods, and how these all threaten food sovereignty.
3. Increase efforts to link the resistance to land grabbing with positive alternatives to industrial agriculture and corporate-controlled food systems, by documenting and promoting (as inspiration, not as recipes for change) examples and models of agroecological and biodiverse family farming that embody and ensure food sovereignty.

GRAIN publications

4. Explore resources required to re-instate “*Seedling*” as a print publication, or as an online publication and explore ways of supporting or finding partners to download, print and distribute it nationally or regionally. Assess together with partners and donors strategies for publication of “*Semences de la biodiversité*”.

GRAIN’s online presence and visibility

5. Consider adding *highly visible* links from farmlandgrab.org to the GRAIN website and to other sites in which GRAIN is involved, and include the GRAIN logo on these sites.
6. Ensure that links for social media are *highly visible* (impossible to miss) on all websites that GRAIN manages, to encourage more users to share more widely documents from these pages.
7. Discuss with partners possibilities for more cross-fertilisation of links between web pages.

Getting GRAIN materials to the grassroots

8. More support could be sought internationally and regionally to enable local groups and GRAIN in the regions to transform information products for local use.
9. A pedagogical and communications resource person could be engaged to build the capacity of partners, if they so desire it, to translate / transform / package GRAIN materials and messages to make them more accessible to grassroots organisations, particularly in Africa but also in Asia and Latin America.

Capacity building and cooperation with social movements

10. A priority may be to increase GRAIN’s presence in Africa and reinstate a position in Asia.

11. There is room for more training workshops with partner movements to build capacity of their members and leaders in research, analysis and dissemination of these messages to entire networks and coalitions and all their members, and also for more follow-up on workshops.
12. Continue to nurture close and mutually respectful relations with social movements and partners. Where GRAIN facilitates contacts between partners in the global south and potential funding sources, such arrangements are most effective when GRAIN members from that region are involved.

Outreach to the media, new technologies and communications strategies

13. Explore a strategic communications strategy and policies that prioritise reaching out to the media and new audiences, the use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), investigating the potential of mobile phones and other communications technologies for dissemination of messages and materials, upcoming events and actions.

Financial and organisational sustainability

14. Revisit and review GRAIN's role and ambitions to match them with capacity to avoid staff "burn-out", and define its role with collaborators more clearly to counter unrealistic expectations.
15. Aim to regain GRAIN's pre-cutback funding and staffing, even if it does not necessarily re-establish the same configuration and location of staff. Consider developing a corps of strong volunteers or interns, capable of and willing to take on some of the excess workload.
16. Consider engaging dedicated fund-raising personnel and attempt to diversify sources of funding, including by using web pages, social media as tools for raising funds from individual users. Consider a tool or option inviting users that find the websites useful to donate to GRAIN on the home page of its own website and farmlandgrab.org.
17. Focus on garnering new generations and supporters of GRAIN's work, or "GRAINees" (perhaps using social media) to ensure the sustainability of the organisation and its work.