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## Land grabs in Latin America menace food security despite FAO claims



Land grabbing emerged as one of the most important barriers to the advancement of Food Sovereignty in Latin America & the Caribbean at a recent meeting of social movement organisations in advance of a major United Nations conference in Buenos Aires addressing agriculture and food security for the region.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations position on land grabs legitimises the industrial monocultures responsible for the expulsion of farmers and indigenous communities from their lands say Latin American and Caribbean social movements and organisations. The groups denounced FAO's position in a "Declaration of Buenos Aires" signed at the third special Conference on Food Sovereignty<sup>1</sup> March 22-25th just prior to the FAO's Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean. The social movement conference gathered over 100 organisations from 20 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to debate the most pressing issues in the region and propose policies towards

achieving food sovereignty. The FAO-RLC conference, held every two years, is meant to help establish budget and programme priorities for FAO actions worldwide.

FAO's claim, in recent studies, that "the land grabbing phenomenon is in its early stages and only found in two large countries: Argentina and Brazil" set off alarm bells for conference participants and provoked a highly critical analysis of the FAO's position.

<sup>1</sup> the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty  
[www.foodsovereignty.org/en/Inicio.aspx](http://www.foodsovereignty.org/en/Inicio.aspx)

# Background

Faced with the ongoing issue of land grabbing, FAO stated the need for “responsible investment in agriculture”, and proposed “the creation of an international consensus on the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investments (RAI)”<sup>2</sup> along with other organisations such as the UN Organisation on Commerce and Development (UNCTAD), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Bank.

In response to these proposals, civil society organisations issued the Dakar Appeal during the Dakar Social Forum.<sup>3</sup> The appeal asked the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to reject RAI, considering it both illegitimate and inadequate to deal with the phenomenon of land grabbing.

FAO, IFAD and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) published a joint study on the increase of land grabbing in Africa, in 2009. Following this report, the FAO’s Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (RLC) took the initiative to look for evidence that could indicate if the phenomenon of land grabbing was taking place in Latin America, and if so, to what extent. With this goal in mind, the RLC commissioned national studies in 17 countries across the region, focusing on the concentration and dynamics of land ownership over the last five years. On the 14th and 15th of November 2011, FAO convened a meeting in Santiago, Chile, entitled “Dynamics of the Land Market in Latin America and the Caribbean”, where they presented these studies and the aforementioned conclusion.

**Global agribusiness’  
brutal expansion in  
Latin America is one  
of the main factors  
driving land grabbing  
in the region**



Agriculture in Brazil. (Photo: ESA)

<sup>2</sup> Foreign investments in agriculture for food security, [www.fao.org/economic/est/investments/en/](http://www.fao.org/economic/est/investments/en/)

<sup>3</sup> Dakar Appeal against the land grab , [www.dakarappeal.org/index.php/en/](http://www.dakarappeal.org/index.php/en/)

## Public or private?

According to social movements in Buenos Aires, the work presented by FAO “provides a very grave overview of the state of land in Latin America, the processes of land grabbing, and the foreign takeover of production of basic foodstuffs, agro-fuels, forestry production, tourism, mining and conservation.”

The real surprise was the final report, which came to the conclusion that “the phenomenon of land grabbing is in its early stages and is only to be found in the two largest countries: Argentina and Brazil.” According to the social organisations, “these conclusions result from using very limited criteria: the buying up of large extensions of land for the production of food, where at least one foreign government make up the actors or agents involved.” In fact, the RLC does not consider land grabbing to be the appropriate label where private investors are involved; in their view, land grabbing only results from sovereign (state) investment.

This position is unacceptable for many civil society organisations. It is worth underlining that similar arguments are currently coming up in other regions too, in order to limit the debate. In Australia, for example, where 12% of agricultural land is in the hands of foreign investors, certain groups are trying to distinguish between private and public investors in order to limit the search for better controls and regulations - as if private investment is seen as somehow beyond question, as something that makes the world go round.

Taking control of large extents of land, territories and related rights is a problem regardless of whether we are talking about Beidahuang Group (a state enterprise of the Heilongjiang Province of China), Hassad Food (formed by the Qatari government), a company like CalyxAgro (a subsidiary of the French group Louis Dreyfus Commodities) or Adecoagro (directed by the Hungarian-American investor George Soros).

Global agribusiness’ brutal expansion in Latin America is one of the main factors driving land grabbing in the region. Other important causes include mining in countries such as Argentina, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Mexico and Guatemala, as well as the mega hydroelectric projects and the large tourism businesses that usurp common land. It is also important to note that



(Photo:Reuters)

false solutions to Climate Change such as those represented by REDD+ and the planting of monocultures for biomass production for energy purposes are further conducive factors of land grabbing in Latin America.

The groups’ meeting in Buenos Aires also discussed another report titled ‘Report of the High Level Panel of Experts of the Committee for World Food Security (CFS) on land tenure and international investments in agriculture’ of July 2011. This report, which seeks to orient debate on the issue, points to opportunities that can arise from foreign investment in land, without denouncing land grabbing.

# Going beyond definitions

The Declaration<sup>4</sup> which was presented at the 32nd Regional Conference of FAO expressed, with respect to land grabbing, that:

“... we declare our disagreement with the conclusions of the FAO-RLC’s final report, Dynamics of the land market in Latin America and the Caribbean, which maintains that ‘the phenomenon of land grabbing is now in its early phases and is limited to just two large countries: Argentina and Brazil.’ These conclusions are the result of the application of very limited criteria for land grabbing in which only large-scale acquisitions of foreign lands for the production of food by sovereign nations are included. Moreover, the July 2011 document proposed to orient debate on the issue, The Report of the High Level Panel of Experts of the Committee for World Food Security (CFS) on land tenure and international investments in agriculture, points to the “opportunities” of foreign investment in land, without denouncing land grabbing.

While the documents included in the FAO-RLC report paint a deeply worrying picture of the land situation in Latin America and the Caribbean and the foreign takeover of lands, whether for the production of foods, agrofuels, tree plantations, tourism, mining or conservation, we believe that the report’s conclusions are extremely dangerous, as they hide and blur – behind supposedly rigorous scientific analysis and technical language – a problem of enormous proportions in terms of



## Land grabbing emerged as one of the most important barriers to the advancement of Food Sovereignty

the scale of the land involved and the impacts on local economies and the lives of millions of peasants, people of Afro-communities, indigenous peoples, family farmers, and fisherfolk.

As organisations and social movements struggling against land grabbing all over the world, we demand that FAO-RLC urgently revise its position, listen to the voices and demands of the people, and act in accordance with processes implemented by the FAO at the international level. What is of fundamental importance is not the definition of “land grabbing” but urgent action to stop a process that is pushing people out of their territories every day.

In this sense, we also reject the definition of ‘Forests’ established by the FAO, as this too promotes land grabbing for the creation of large monoculture plantations. By allowing plantations to be defined as ‘Forests’, the FAO legitimises industrial monocultures

that are responsible for innumerable negative impacts, including the expulsion of farmers and indigenous communities from their lands.”

<sup>4</sup> Declaration of the third special conference on Food Sovereignty, for rights and for life, [www.radiomundoreal.fm/5326-real-solution?lang=en](http://www.radiomundoreal.fm/5326-real-solution?lang=en)



## Say ‘No’ to all land grabbing

GRAIN, along with hundreds of social movement groups, is convinced that the only alternative is an immediate halt land grabbing on a global level. Following the proposals of the Dakar appeal: “We call on our parliaments and on our national governments to put an immediate stop to large-scale Land Grabs – both now and in the future – and to reinstate the lands taken.”

The recent report by GRAIN<sup>5</sup> which exposes more than 400 land grabbing cases involving a surface area of nearly 35 million hectares in 66 countries, provides undeniable evidence of this problem. And it is

important to note that dozens of cases included in this report are located in Latin America.

**“WE CALL ON OUR PARLIAMENTS AND ON OUR NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS TO PUT AN IMMEDIATE STOP TO LARGE-SCALE LAND GRABS AND TO REINSTATE THE LANDS TAKEN”**

5 GRAIN publica conjunto de datos con más de 400 acaparamientos de tierra agrícolas a nivel mundial, <http://www.grain.org/es/article/entries/4481-grain-publica-conjunto-de-datos-con-mas-de-400-acaparamientos-de-tierra-agricolas-a-nivel-mundial>



## GOING FURTHER

**International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC)**

[www.foodsovereignty.org/en/Inicio.aspx](http://www.foodsovereignty.org/en/Inicio.aspx)

**Foreign investments in agriculture for food security**

[www.fao.org/economic/est/inversiones/en/](http://www.fao.org/economic/est/inversiones/en/)

**Dakar Appeal against the land grab**

[www.dakarappeal.org/index.php/en/](http://www.dakarappeal.org/index.php/en/)

**Declaration of the third special conference on Food Sovereignty, for rights and for life**

[www.radiomundoreal.fm/5326-real-solution?lang=en](http://www.radiomundoreal.fm/5326-real-solution?lang=en)

**GRAIN has published a collection of more than 400 Land Grabs of agricultural lands worldwide**

[www.grain.org/article/entries/4479-grain-releases-data-set-with-over-400-global-land-grabs?locale=en](http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4479-grain-releases-data-set-with-over-400-global-land-grabs?locale=en)

GRAIN is a small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems. *Against the grain* is a series of short opinion pieces on recent trends and developments in the issues that GRAIN works on. Each one focuses on a specific and timely topic

The complete collection of *Against the grain* can be found on our website at

<http://www.grain.org/articles/>

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