

A few rich countries trying to secure future food or energy supplies, together with agro-investors/speculators looking for new profit opportunities, are taking advantage of cheap land resources from poorer countries, often with populations that are even more food insecure. Many of these deals are tantamount to landgrabbing that violate the right to land and right to food of small farmers and fishers, especially women, pastoralists and tribal peoples.



Addressing the Drivers of the Global Rush for Farmland Acquisitions

The proliferation of large-scale foreign land acquisitions (FLAs) in poor countries have been a matter of concern to the international community over the last two years. Civil society organizations have promptly raised the alarm over their lack of transparency and negative consequences. Many of these deals are tantamount to land grabbing that violate the right to land and right to food of small farmers and fishers, especially women, pastoralists and tribal peoples. The World Bank's much anticipated report on FLAs—*Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can It Yield Sustainable and Equitable Benefits?*—confirms, albeit with little new evidence, the dismal benefits and adverse social and environmental consequences these types of investments bring to their countries of destination (**see Box 1**).

While there is now greater scepticism about the “win-win scenario” depicted by investors, host governments, donors and international institutions promoting FLAs, influential institutions including the World Bank remain optimistic about foreign land deals. Proponents argue that FLAs can be optimized so that their benefits are harnessed and their negative effects are avoided or reduced to a minimum. This managed “win-win” state is to be achieved by instituting procedural and framework improvements, such as better land governance and private property systems in host countries, and through voluntary guidelines or codes of conduct containing principles that investors can adhere to. The latter approach is one that has gained ground internationally. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank Group, UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and the International Fund for Agriculture and Development (IFAD) have agreed on a set of seven principles for responsible investment in FLAs (**see Box 2**), and have jointly set out a process of generating support around these among relevant countries and stakeholders.

These regulatory principles appear desirable in principle in order to mitigate the negative impacts of FLAs. However the various voluntary guidelines or codes of conduct being proposed by inter-governmental agencies to regulate FLAs have no teeth and therefore do not offer even minimal protections or offer means of redressing grave human rights violations that often arise from these deals. Indeed, countries that host these agro-investments are often poor countries in desperate need of foreign exchange, have weak institutional capabilities or have corrupt or subservient governments that turn a blind eye to the adverse economic, social, and environmental consequences that are associated with these deals.

More importantly, this policy approach is premised on the assumption that the proliferation of FLAs is the unavoidable consequence of and/or legitimate response to increasing food insecurity, particularly for capital-rich but food deficit countries. It does not address the more basic problems that fuel the rush to FLAs and the factors that encourage them

This policy brief discusses the drivers of FLAs and suggests policy actions for addressing these by way of making the world agri-food system stable, resilient, sustainable, and true to its fundamental role of feeding the world's people.

What are the principal drivers and motives behind the proliferation of FLAs?

Food security for resource-poor but cash-rich countries is often identified as the main driver for the land deals. Food security is a valid concern. But analysis of the nature of the land projects and the players involved casts doubt on its primacy. For instance, the World Bank, using available evidence, found that at least 42% of the land projects do not involve food production (21% focus on industrial or cash crops, 21% on biofuels, and another 21% is split between livestock, conservation/game reserve, and plantation forestry).¹ The Bank further found that the bulk of the investments come from agribusiness, industry, and financial institutions. These are entities who are not traditionally involved in upstream food production as their main line of business, and whose foray into foreign land deals is motivated primarily by the interest to acquire control over farmland as a valuable asset. This can be said especially of private financial institutions. Moreover, these are entities whose unchecked patterns of investment and resources use converged to create the food price crisis, along with the energy and financial crises.

UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food Olivier de Schutter attributes the FLA trend to problems in the food and agricultural system itself, including unsustainable practices that lead to soil depletion and water exhaustion, and a poorly functioning and unreliable international market for agricultural commodities. Indeed, the global farmland rush points to an increasingly distressed and insecure food and agricultural system, as land and water resources are being subject to competing interests and agendas. A few rich countries are trying to secure food or energy supplies for their population together with agro-investors/speculators looking for new profit opportunities by taking advantage of cheap land and other resources from desperately poor countries whose populations are even more food insecure (**see Table 1**)—all in the context of a more hostile climate, depleting oil and natural resources, and population growth.

Private investments for speculative financial gain

The flight of capital from unstable financial markets and anticipation that future farmland values are bound to appreciate is fuelling a rush of private investments in FLAs. Financial players are flocking to tangible assets such as farmlands for safety due to lingering uncertainties in financial markets. In the U.S., annualized farmland yields since 1951 is reported to be in the region of 10%-12%, comparable with stock yields in the S&P 500, but obtained with far less volatility.² Moreover, factors such as population growth, economic growth in developing countries, rising demand for food, commodities, and agrofuels, and limited if not shrinking supplies of fertile land are all perceived to drive demand for farmland, and in turn, future farmland prices. The prospect of fertile soil becoming a strategic global asset—perhaps on par with other scarce resources as oil—has further increased the appeal of FLAs as a profitable long-term investment. Some of the prominent private financial institutions that are known to have already snapped up land deals or are actively seeking to do so are Barclays Capital (UK), Goldman Sachs (U.S.), and Morgan Stanley (U.S.). Multilateral institutions, particularly the World Bank's International Financial Corporation

Box 1. Actual experience of FLAs in developing countries

DRC–maize project: “Investment displaced local cultivators, pushing them into a national park where farmers now pay guards to let them cultivate within the reserve; other farmers forced to relocate 50 km away where they rent land from local people. Mineral poor soils highly susceptible to erosion following biomass clearance. No EIA required...”

Liberia–rice project: “Economic problems caused investor to encroach on fertile wetlands, in contravention of agreements reached with the community (which cannot be enforced), displacing 30 percent of the local population. Compensation is not offered to all who lost rights. 400 full-time jobs have been created for unskilled workers (mostly ex-combatants) but there is concern about hiring foreigners who are willing to work for lower wages. As a result of deforestation, more than 50 ha of swamp have been silted from the first year of operations.”

Liberia–timber concession (example of attaching a “social pact”): “Social agreement clearly specifies rental payments and benefit sharing with government, but prohibition of investors’ interference with good faith exercise of customary uses of timber and other forest products is not adhered to. Investment has thus restricted community access to forest products in context of increasing population and decreasing farmland.”

Mozambique–sugarcane: “Only 35-40 [people] were employed full time plus some 30 on a seasonal basis [despite investor’s promise of 2,650 jobs]. (...) Local people lost access to forest for fuel wood, game meat, fish. Investor uses local water supply and roads without compensation; thus negatively affecting women who gather the water. EIA noted potential negative impacts of agro-chemicals on soil, air, water and recommended mitigation measures. Also negative impact of forest clearance for sugarcane production.”

Tanzania–livestock + jatropha: “Joint venture between Dutch and Tanzanian companies; land belongs to four villages, who still must approve transfers to the investor; only one village has so far granted land rights. Investor wants to lease land directly from the local villages, in violation of the Village Land Act. Potentially negative impacts on pastoralist communities’ access to grazing land, fire wood and water. Expected employment benefits not quantified.”

Zambia–export crops: “Local fears about potential displacement. Potential population displacement, loss of access to forest products, including edible caterpillars. Intact miombo woodlands on site would be negatively impacted by clearing for cultivation; current environmental impacts limited to land clearing for road and dam construction and related soil erosion.”

Lifted from GRAIN, “World Bank report on land grabbing: beyond the smoke and mirrors,” *Against the Grain*, September 2010. Source: World Bank, “Rising global interest in farmland: Can it yield to sustainable and equitable benefits?,” September 2010.

(IFC) and the Foreign Investment Advisory Service (FIAS), also support FLAs by providing financing and technical support.³

Growing demand for agricultural raw materials for energy generation and manufacturing

Rising demand for agrofuels and access to new sources of raw materials for manufacturing goods are also driving FLAs. The demand for energy crops such as corn and sugarcane has rapidly risen over the past several years as governments of oil-dependent industrialized countries—prominently the EU, but also some major developing countries—introduce blending targets for agrofuels into their energy supply, coupled with other forms of government subsidy encouraging agrofuel production. Ethanol production has seen a high annual growth rate of 15% between 2000 and 2006. In 2008, over 17 billion gallons of ethanol were produced globally, of which the US and Brazil accounted for 89%. Biodiesel production meanwhile has been growing 40% per year between 2002 and 2007.⁴ Demand for other raw materials such as rubber are also increasing. China, whose share of global rubber consumption is expected to grow from 22% in 2008 to 30% in 2020, has secured land deals in Southeast Asia to produce and export back sap from plantations.⁵

Securing food supplies

Wealthy but resources-poor countries facing rising domestic pressures and constraints to their food growing capacity are turning to FLAs for offshore food production to secure long-term

Box 2. Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment that Respect Rights, Livelihoods and Resources (FAO, IFAD, UNCTAD and the World Bank Group)

- 1. Respecting land and resource rights.** Existing rights to land and associated natural resources are recognized and respected.
- 2. Ensuring food security.** Investments do not jeopardize food security but strengthen it.
- 3. Ensuring transparency, good governance, and a proper enabling environment.** Processes for acquiring land and other resources and then making associated investments are transparent and monitored, ensuring the accountability of all stakeholders within a proper legal, regulatory, and business environment.
- 4. Consultation and participation.** All those materially affected are consulted, and the agreements from consultations are recorded and enforced.
- 5. Responsible agro-investing.** Investors ensure that projects respect the rule of law, reflect industry best practice, are economically viable, and result in durable shared value.
- 6. Social sustainability.** Investments generate desirable social and distributional impacts and do not increase vulnerability
- 7. Environmental sustainability.** Environmental impacts of a project are quantified and measures are taken to encourage sustainable resource use while minimizing and mitigating the risk and magnitude of negative impacts.

Source: IFAD, FAO, UNCTAD, and WBG, "Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment that Respect Rights, Livelihoods and Resources, 25 January 2010.

food supplies. East Asian countries (e.g. China, South Korea, and Japan) with large economies as well as large or rapidly growing populations fall into this basket. China, for instance, has a huge and still rapidly growing population, and although largely self-sufficient, has seen its limited land resources (9% of world arable land) exhausted and degraded by industrial expansion and urbanization. Another group of countries that fall into this category are the Gulf States (e.g. Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia). Being built on desert, these countries grapple with limited land and water resources, and are thus largely dependent on food imports. But they possess plenty of capital thanks to oil resources, and are pursuing FLAs as a long-term strategy to reduce their dependence to foreign supplies and vulnerability to world market price trends.

What are the factors that encourage increasing speculation in farmland?

Land degradation and land use change

Threatening future capacity to produce sufficient food are unsustainable patterns of agricultural production and unchecked industrial expansion, which result in the degradation and loss of arable land. The spread of cities alone consumes enormous tracts of farmland in much of the world. Between 1987 and 1992, for example, China lost close to one million hectares of farmland each year to urbanization and the expansion of roads and industries.⁶ In the US, urban sprawl takes over nearly 400,000 hectares of farmland each year.⁷ Intensive chemical use, monocropping, and mechanized farming have also diminished soil fertility and productivity. Some 27% of soil damage is attributed to destructive agricultural practices and land mismanagement.⁸

Expansion of agricultural production for non-human consumption

Apart from the loss and damage of agricultural land, future food security is further compromised by the diversion of agricultural land to producing feedstock for livestock and agrofuels production. For instance, nearly 40% of global grain production, or about 650 million tons of grain—equivalent to the annual calorie needs of 3.5 billion people—is used as feed to livestock, much of which is consumed in the North.⁹

Table 1. Land Deals in Food-insecure African Countries

Recipient Country	Number of Deals ¹	Magnitude, Minimum (million hectares) ²	Land deals as percentage of agricultural area ³	Number of undernourished people, 2005-07 (millions) ⁴	Proportion of undernourished in total population, 2005-07 (%) ⁵
Ethiopia	26	2.892	8.2	31.6	41
Madagascar	24	2.745	6.7	4.5	25
Sudan	20	3.171	2.3	8.8	22
Tanzania	15	1.717	5.0	13.7	34
Mali	13	2.417	6.1	1.5	12
Mozambique	10	10.305	21.1	8.1	38
Uganda	7	1.874	14.6	6.1	21
DR Congo	6	11.048	48.8	41.9	69
Nigeria	6	0.821	1.0	9.2	6
Zambia	6	2.245	8.8	5.2	43
Ghana	5	0.089	0.6	1.2	5
Malawi	5	0.307	6.2	3.9	28
Senegal	5	0.510	5.9	2	17

^{1,2,3} Cecile Friis and Anette Reenberg, Land grab in Africa: Emerging land system drivers in a teleconnected world, GLP Report No. 1 (Copenhagen: Global Land Project International Project Office, 2010), 11-12. The data represents results from the screening of media reports posted in the "Commercial Pressures on Land" blog of the International Land Coalition. In the period 13 August 2008 to 15 April 2010, 236 articles about land deals in Africa were recorded. The collected data was triangulated with similar inventories from GRAIN, the International Food Policy Research Institute, and the GTZ. The screening and triangulation identified 27 African countries hosting land deals, of which the top 13 in terms of number of land deals are displayed above.

^{4,5} Food and Agriculture Organization, Food Security Statistics, 13 September 2010.

Instability in food and commodity markets due to commodities speculation

Avoiding exposure to spikes in world food prices and external supply shocks is one major reason why food-importing regions such as the Middle East are seeking to directly control food supplies through FLAs. The food price crisis of 2007-08 was particularly hard on the Gulf States, which saw their food import bills balloon and supplies cut off as countries imposed export restrictions. However, it is important to note that the spike in food prices was not so much a reflection of demand and supply movements, but was largely driven by excessive and unchecked speculative activity in commodity derivatives. Over the five year period 2003 to 2008, investments in commodity indexes rose 25-fold, from \$13 billion to \$317 billion, resulting in a tripling of commodity prices.¹⁰ Worsening the crisis was speculation and resulting price increases in oil, which is an important input in industrial food production and transportation. The deregulation of financial markets gave the green light for frenzied trading in financial assets that artificially inflated commodity prices and caused extreme price volatility.

Climate change

In the face of growing population demands, crop yields are predicted to decrease by up to 20% in large parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America.¹¹ Temperature increases will cause desertification and bring about shortages in water supply in some areas, especially in the Middle East and Africa. In contrast, flooding and inundation will be experienced by countries with many coastal areas such as the South, East and Southeast Asia. The stability of the food supply is likely to be disrupted by more frequent and severe climate extremes, especially in many regions that are already vulnerable. Availability of food may be affected negatively by increases in pests and diseases in crop, livestock and humans, as well as by reduced water availability and water quality.

Recommendations: Addressing the underlying drivers of FLAs

Food and agricultural policies should be systematically reoriented towards a food sovereignty agenda domestically and internationally. Addressing FLAs on the basis of a food sovereignty agenda tries to do four different things at once. First, it seeks to uphold domestic food security and development needs — and protect the rights of food producers, consumers, and communities—in countries where they are at risk of being compromised or violated by FLAs. Second, it seeks to diminish the desirability of FLAs as an instrument for wealthy but resource-poor countries to pursue food security objectives, by expanding their options to do the same domestically, using domestic resources. Third, it seeks to eliminate the incentives and opportunities for speculative financial investments in farmlands. And finally, it seeks to reform the world food and agricultural system into a system that can both withstand and help solve emerging environmental challenges such as climate change and ecological degradation, and at the same time eliminate hunger, lift the rural poor out of poverty, and provide accessible and nutritious food for a growing world population.

People's sovereignty should extend to the exercise of economic policy. Developing countries must be given sufficient space to utilize trade, investment, and macroeconomic policies to protect their agriculture and food security. For instance, countries should be allowed to use investment measures to regulate or restrict foreign investments in arable land, or maximize its linkages and benefits to the local economy through local content or employment requirements. This has implications on binding international trade and investment agreements which curtail the space for countries to exercise such measures.

1. Re-establish or strengthen people's control over resources. People's access to and control over productive resources is the foundation of food sovereignty. Hence it is necessary to promote and implement genuine agrarian reform programs to redistribute land, capital and other productive assets and ensure access to water, seed, energy sources and other inputs. Land tenure of smallholders should be strengthened, and communities' ancestral domain and common property resources should be protected. The primary beneficiaries of such reforms should be small producers particularly women and other marginalized sectors.

2. Prioritize the use of land and water resources for agricultural production geared towards meeting domestic food needs. Governments should introduce measures to check land conversion and use for non-agricultural purposes, such as for urban, residential, and industrial expansion. They should also check the expansion of acreage devoted to growing luxury monocultures and grain feeds for export to foreign markets, which usually are already enjoying very high if not excessive levels of consumption. Governments should strive to achieve food self-reliance. Agriculture should focus more on growing diverse food crops for satisfying domestic and local demand.

3. Boost institutional and financial support for smallholder, locally-based, and ecologically-sustainable forms of agriculture. These forms of agriculture hold the most promise of providing food for a growing global population under greater environmental pressures, alongside other ecological and development benefits absent in conventional industrial agriculture.

Evidence from various studies in many developing countries show that farmers who employed resource-conserving, ecological, and organic farming techniques have significantly increased their agricultural productivity, some by as much as triple the original yield. A particular study that modelled the global food supply that could be grown organically on the current agricultural land base found that organic methods could hypothetically produce enough food on a global per capita basis to sustain the current human population, and potentially an even larger population, without putting more farmland into production. Agroecological techniques could also restore degraded lands, which could help offset any losses in arable land due to climate change.¹²

Reinforcing ecological agriculture's food security potential are its in-built climate mitigation and adaptation mechanisms. For instance, biodiverse agriculture enhances the soil's carbon sequestration capacity, reduces emissions from chemical and pesticide use, and is more resilient to environmental shocks. Alongside all these are its development and poverty reduction benefits. Organic farming is knowledge- and labour-intensive, and thus contributes to local/rural

Box 3. What are the adverse consequences of FLAs?

False economic benefits

- Because of lopsided power relations between investors and host countries, the latter are unlikely able to negotiate the terms of land deals to their best interest. Target countries are among the world's poorest countries and not in a position to refuse any investment, even if the terms are not ideal.
- Incentives granted to investors negate the claimed benefits. Incentives granted to investors hinder the ability of communities to benefit from the capital that is generated in their countries that could in turn go to prioritize food security and development priorities of investor countries.
- Employment of highly mechanized production technologies with limited employment creation effects.
- Dependence on imported inputs and hence limits domestic multiplier effects.

Displacement, dispossession and impoverishment of small peasants and other marginalized communities

- Investors focus on countries where small farmers do not enjoy strong institutional protection or support. Small farmers lose their land mainly because of weak land governance and land rights protection, especially for informal or customary land, water or grazing rights.
- Limited labour rights and poor working conditions.
- Lack of information and transparency à no free and prior informed consent of affected communities
- Risks bear greater on women, who bear most of the burden to grow food and meet household needs but enjoy the less legal protections and limited participation in institutions and political activities.
- Greater food insecurity for affected communities and host country populations.

Foreign investors use most of the farmlands for the production of food, which are to be shipped back to their own respective countries, and not for domestic markets where these were acquired.

- Other acquired lands are utilized for producing crops mainly for industrial use or producing animal feeds and not for human consumption. As such, FLAs aggravate hunger and food insecurity in host countries.
- Food insecurity is made worse where land and water resources are channelled to foreign-controlled farmlands at the expense of domestic smallholders.

Environment degradation

- The foreign farmland rush contributes to deforestation and the conversion of native forests and arable land to monoculture plantations, which are known to lead to greenhouse gas emissions, soil erosion and degradation, water exhaustion, and the loss of biodiversity.

Social and political conflict

- FLAs could drive domestic competition for declining land and water resources, or inflame existing social, ethnic, or political tensions, possibly leading to open resource or political conflict.

Undue foreign political interference and influence

- Foreign control over large swathes of land could translate to undue influence over the host country's internal political processes and economic policies, influence that is aimed at bringing about or maintaining a climate partial towards foreign business.

employment and raising incomes, especially for women. It safeguards rural livelihoods, revitalizes smallholder agriculture, and reduces the push factors for out-migration.

Governments of resource-poor (e.g. arid) countries should, as a matter of national priority, promote and invest in participatory scientific research involving farmers, agro-ecologists, and communities on how best to use their limited land and water resources for sustainable, climate-resilient, locally-adapted and people-led food production. Some options include urban and peri-urban agriculture, and techniques such as hydro- and aquaponics. International cooperation is crucial for financial, scientific, and technology resources to be shared among countries with different levels of capacity, resource-endowment, and experience with best practices.

4. Building food or grain reserves at the national or regional levels. Grain reserves can stabilize prices by mere fact of existence. They assure markets that supplies are sufficient and predictable, thus discouraging investors from speculating wildly about future supply

uncertainties. Reserves can also actively stabilize prices through market intervention: purchasing food commodities when prices are down to reduce supply, and selling when prices are up to raise supply and guide prices down. Apart from stabilizing prices, reserves can also act as a buffer in case of sudden external or domestic supply shocks, such as crop failures, natural disasters, or export restrictions by trading partners.

5. Ban or severely restrict speculative trading by institutional investors in commodity futures.

Some of the measures suggested to curb speculation in commodity futures are: 1) to re-establish speculative position limits for all speculators for all commodities markets; 2) define excessive speculation numerically and place an overall limit on excessive speculation for each commodity; 3) and prohibit the practice of investing through passive commodity index replication.¹³

6. Government should discontinue agrofuels targets and blending quotas, and withdraw subsidies and other forms of support to agrofuels production.

Key to stopping the drive for FLAs and freeing up more land for food production is for governments especially of high- and middle-income economies to drop their agrofuel blending targets. Demand for agrofuels not only diverts land resources and feedstock to non-food use. Through the conversion of natural carbon sinks such as wetlands and rainforests, and the expansion of fuel- and chemical-intensive monoculture farming, agrofuels production results in significant greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that far exceed the *GHG savings* from the substitution of agrofuels to conventional transport fuels—the very reason why agrofuels are promoted in the first place. Agrofuels are a losing proposition, and have no place in any forward-looking sustainable energy and transportation policy. Consumption requirements and production incentives that keep agrofuels competitive should be withdrawn. Governments, especially of high-consuming industrialized economies, seeking to cut their dependence on fossil fuels should instead focus their efforts on reducing consumption levels, investing in efficient public/mass transportation systems, and developing domestic/local renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, geothermal, and small-scale hydro.

Notes

1. Percentages drawn from 405 projects with commodity data, out of 464 projects identified from all information posted on the blog farmlandgrab.org between October 1, 2008 to October 31, 2009. World Bank, "Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can It Yield Sustainable Benefits," 7 September 2010.
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