

Land Grabbing in Brighton – by Robin Palmer

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<http://www.mokoro.co.uk/newsletters/1>

As many readers of this newsletter will know, I've been banging on about global land grabbing rather a lot since I joined Mokoro on a free transfer from Oxfam early in 2007. This is partly because I totally failed to anticipate the phenomenon myself, and partly because most of the people I'd been working with, especially in Southern Africa, were in the same position. So I began a little awareness raising, including a 4-page rant, 'A new Scramble for Africa?' in the *Mokoro Newsletter* 52 of May 2010, in which I wrote that I was worried by 'the nature, scale and secrecy of land grabbing and the seemingly limited capacity of anyone to do much to either halt or modify it.' Later I became further worried by what I felt amounted almost to a conspiracy of silence on the subject or, at best, a timidity on the part of many researchers who seemed desperately anxious to find painless, 'win-win' solutions.

Now I need worry no more! Back in January 2010, a group of 5 academics set up the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI) to undertake 'engaged research' on the phenomenon.¹ It began with a small grant competition (maximum \$2,000 per study) for 40 young researchers, which proved highly successful. In September 2010, I organized a session on land grabbing in Africa at a conference of the African Studies Association of the UK, in which Liz Daley and I gave papers, as did Ruth Hall from Cape Town, one of the founders of the LDPI. Ian Scoones, another founder, presented on fast track land reform in Zimbabwe.

Shortly afterwards, LDPI made plans to hold a big conference at IDS, Sussex (Ian's base) on 6-8 April 2011. The response to this initiative was overwhelming. Amazingly, over 400 people wanted to write papers for the event, but there was space for only 120 at IDS. (In practice they broke the safety regulations and admitted around 160). The organizers were clearly surprised by this reaction, but used it to create a really exciting programme – one of those where you would like to be in 3 different places at the same time. 70 countries were featured in the 120 papers.

You can generally gauge how a conference is going by the hubbub level in the coffee breaks. It remained constantly high throughout the 3 days. And the sun shone down on us, so that Sussex resembled a Californian campus! Quite deliberately, an extremely varied audience had been assembled. Women and men came from all continents and from many walks of life; including peasant and farmers' associations, activists (Via Campesina, FIAN etc), 29 research institutions and 69 universities, some NGO folk, over 20 PhD students who had won LDPI small grants (an important and imaginative inclusion), plus some of the usual suspects from the World Bank, USAID, FAO, DFID, and Dutch and German government agencies. As Jun Borrás (the prime moving force behind the LDPI) put it, this was to be an academic conference, but not one detached from the real world!²

¹ At the April 2011 conference, I was given a shopping bag with the logo: *LDPI – Land Deal Politics Initiative: Engaged research on the global land grab*. www.iss.nl/ldpi

² LDPI aims to 'generate in-depth research and systematize cross-national and cross-regional comparative studies and create a space for the mutually beneficial exchange of data, information and

The opening address was given by Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, a hugely impressive figure in this area, who argued that:

What we need now is a vision that goes beyond disciplining land deals and providing policymakers with a checklist of how to destroy the global peasantry responsibly. If it is to be truly responsible, agricultural investment must be investment that benefits the poor in the South, rather than leading to a transfer of resources to the rich in the North. It must be investment that truly reduces hunger and malnutrition, rather than aggravating them.³

This set the scene for a variety of presentations, broadly streamed into:

- livelihoods (including gender, transition countries, pastoralism, biofuels)
- environment (including carbon grabs, green grabs, water)
- political economy (including partnerships and business models, China invests)
- governance (including codes of conduct, human rights, legal frameworks)
- politics (including local elites, resistance and mobilization).⁴

There were 32 panels in all. There was some seriously scary stuff, including green grabs, in which people were displaced and often seriously abused (in Mexico, Colombia, Tanzania and Kenya) in order to preserve some notion of pristine wilderness for the benefit of wealthy tourists, sometimes in the name of ethical tourism! Narratives have been constructed asserting (falsely) that wildlife is in decline and that local communities can't be trusted with conservation. Living Mayans are moved so that visitors paying \$1,000 a night can enjoy the unspoilt spectacle of ancient Mayan ruins! And the companies which promote and own such ventures appear to be legally untouchable.

Olivier De Schutter called for an alternative vision to what he described as the global enclosure movement. A recurrent theme at the conference was that we are losing the battle of ideas. The dominant narrative is the modernist one - that the peasant world needs to be transformed from outside into large-scale, plantation-style agriculture. If there is some temporary local inconvenience, the price will be worth it in the end in terms of both local and global food security. This ties in neatly with widespread perceptions, particularly at government levels, of the irredeemable backwardness of small-scale farmers (not to mention pastoralists!), coupled with curious but dangerous notions, spurred on by new satellite imagery, of millions of

knowledge with other actors such as agrarian movements, independent think tanks, research institutions, development agencies, development policy experts and policy makers.¹

³ Olivier De Schutter, 'How not to think of land-grabbing: three critiques of large-scale investments in farmland', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, **38**, 2, March 2011, 275
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/ftinterface~db=all~content=a935338940~fulltext=713240930>

⁴ For many of the presentations etc, see the conference website www.future-agricultures.org/land-grab.html And for one of many media responses, see 'The surge in land deals: When others are grabbing their land', *The Economist*, 5 May 2011
http://www.economist.com/node/18648855?story_id=18648855

'spare' hectares of vacant, or marginal land, which can safely be doled out to foreigners on 99-year leases. So, in Cambodia and Laos, in Ethiopia and Mozambique, and across the globe, peasants are losing their land in deals that are almost always done in secret. The power imbalances are extreme; peasants generally have little practical legal recourse, even in countries with progressive local laws, while investors have over 3,000 bilateral investment treaties to fall back on.

In the final session, Ben White, another founder of LDPI, noted that, having carefully studied all the papers submitted to the conference, including those from people who had to be excluded, he could not find a single case of any large-scale corporate land acquisition which had fulfilled its claimed developmental role of increasing food security, or providing jobs or other benefits for rural people. So, he suggested, the burden of proof is surely now on those who favour corporate land acquisition and corporate industrial farming.

Having gender on the agenda was really important, since it is scandalously absent from the vast majority of the literature on land grabbing. I told the audience that by far the best study to date was Liz Daley's recent report commissioned by the International Land Coalition.⁵ Earlier in the week in London, at a Royal African Society meeting I organised, Susie Jacobs, author of *Gender and Agrarian Reforms*, reminded us that gender had also been largely absent from the bulk of the 'classical' literature on land and agrarian reform.

In the final session of what most of us agreed had been a hugely energising event, Jun Borrás concluded that researchers need to be able to intervene more nimbly and quickly, to go beyond a reactive agenda and be more strategic, to identify alternatives, mobilise broader alliances, sustain the dialogue and not be afraid of tensions, which can be productive. We should even think about ways of grabbing land back. In the next phase there will be more small research grants for young scholars and another conference, at Cornell University in New York.

So, hopefully, like the struggle, the Land Deal Politics Initiative will continue.

⁵ Elizabeth Daley, *Gendered impacts of commercial pressures on land*, International Land Coalition, January 2011
http://www.landcoalition.org/sites/default/files/publication/902/MOKORO_Gender_web_11.03.11.pdf