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Abstract

A key element in the global land rush is the everyday 'pin prick' land grabs and accumulation that appear everywhere in the context of a land rush. For the local population, these are ubiquitous parts of the land rush, yet these tend to be nearly invisible to media and academic researchers. These are 'control grabbing' of land and nature done in a variety of ways: legal and illegal, openly or by stealth, with or without use of extra-economic coercion, stealing or leasing, resulting in expulsion or subsumption, some through contract farming others through joint ventures, usually involving non-corporate grabbers, and mostly small-scale in terms of land area – but when aggregated altogether at a landscape, the total area of land could easily be bigger than corporate land deals. It transforms rural societies intensely and extensively, often bringing demise to particular agrarian societies in the manner of death by a thousand pin pricks. Because of their amorphous character, these instances of control grabs are not captured or are not capturable by databases on land deals. Thus, database-oriented and corporate land deal-centric studies miss out on a key element of the land rush. Bringing in this type of land grabs helps us re-center our analysis on the nature of the land rush, and the more complete workings of global capitalism.

Keywords pin prick land grabs, land grabbing, land rush, operational deals, non-operational land deals, large-scale land acquisitions, Land Matrix

Introduction

Contemporary global land grabbing has been one of the most significant issues about contemporary global capitalism and extractivism unfold (Wolford et al. 2024, Neef et al. 2023, Oliveira et al. 2021, McKay et al. 2021, Ye et al. 2020, Zoomers 2010) during the past two decades. It is global because it cuts across the North-South divide and across various sectors of world's economy and ecology: food and agriculture, extractive industries involving subsoil oil, gas and minerals, carbon sequestration, and so on, spanning various aspects of nature: land, water, forest, peatlands, wetlands, oceans and so on (White et al. 2012). Defining land grabbing has not elicited consensus among observers of land grabs. For us, we build on the following definition: "the capturing of control of relatively vast tracts of land and other natural resources through a variety of mechanisms and forms that involve large-scale capital that often shifts resource use orientation into extractive character..." (Borrás et al. 2012: 851; see also Peluso and Lund 2011). This is "whether for international or domestic purposes, as capital's response to the convergence of food, energy and financial crises, climate change mitigation imperatives, and demands for resources from newer hubs of global capital" (Ibid.). This is not a consensus definition, and there are many ways how land grabs is defined and the required methods to investigate these (see Peluso and Lund 2011, Edelman 2013, Oya 2013, Scoones et al. 2013, Hall 2023).

Using such a definition of land grabbing, we can then look at instances of corporate-driven land deals. The dominant land grabs literature that emerged during the past decade or so has been focused on large-scale land acquisitions that are often corporate-driven. These are formally bounded cases: *geographically*, with specific cadastral scope of the land being enclosed, usually those from 1,000 hectares and above; *sectorally*, with specific land and commodity use of the land being categorized, such as for food production, rare earth mining and carbon sequestration; legally, which pertains to a specific legal arrangement under various formal institutional arrangement (purchase, lease, joint venture, and so on); *temporally*, which means limiting the scope of inquiry to the start date of the land deal up to the time of one's databank or analysis of the case, and; *institutionally*, in terms of regulation in which national and/or international regulatory institutions are deployed to categorize and examine a particular case.

Demarcation of land deal cases – case by case, plot by plot, land title by land title, prospector by prospector – is important in making such land acquisitions legible for purposes of large-scale databanking, media reporting, advocacy work by civil society organizations, state regulation, as well as ease and feasibility of academic research inquiry. Demarcation in this way also allows for quantification of land deals, something that is taken as important in weighing the significance of land transactions in politics and economy, or in raising funds for civil society advocacy work. Such demarcation also enables the categorization of land deals status, namely, operational and non-operational (or 'failed') land deals. These two categorizes have captivated the interest of land grabs watchers over time, drawing diverse and competing conclusions as what these terms mean and imply, or why and how large databases on land deals are useful or not.

Our view is that this approach to tracking and examining corporate land deals is relevant and important, both the databanking approaches used to track and aggregate these (with caveats on some weaknesses and flaws of crowd-sourcing approach to databanking), and analyses and studies that use such datasets. Using this data and method allow us to understand the character, pace, condition, trajectory, and impact of global land grabbing – but only partially and depending on how we frame our research questions. Corporate land deals can be differentiated in to two categories: operational and non-operational. Operational land deals are corporate land deals that were concluded and capitalist enterprises have been established. Non-operational land deals are land deals that were concluded, but for various reasons capitalist enterprises were not pursued, or were pursued but were later stalled or stopped. On some occasions, the operational and non-operational status of the enterprises are partial, and thus, in some cases, this question is operational and non-operational is a matter of degree. It is important to emphasize the empirical and analytical distinction between the land deal and the capitalist enterprises that emerge or not from the land deal site; these two are distinct even when they are related. Thus, when the term 'failed land deals' is used but there is no qualifier as to which of the two has failed, then it does not help clarify, empirically or analytically. It can very well be that a capitalist enterprise has failed, but the land deal or land grab was successful and had been perfected. For example, the Karuturi land deal in Gambella, Ethiopia that took 100,000 hectares from the pastoralist villagers stopped their enterprise operation, but has remained in control of the land (Borras et al. 2022; see also Broegaard et al. 2022, Cochrane et al. 2024, Baird 2020 for other cases).

We argue that corporate land deals – both operational and non-operational – in the context of a land rush often are accompanied by a parallel, or that they trigger a third, category of land

transactions, namely, small-scale instances of land accumulation that are usually non-corporate and often outside of media and academic research spotlight. This category is ‘pin prick’ land accumulation (Borras and Franco 2024). By ‘pin prick’ land accumulation we mean those usually small-scale, scattered, often by stealth and almost invisible instances of land accumulation, but that when aggregated could become large-scale in terms of capital involved, widespread and ubiquitous and thus large-scale in geographic terms (Ibid.). The notion of scale here is relative: a small-scale can mean 2 hectares or 1,000 hectares of land depending on local social structures and institutions and the conditions of an unfolding land rush. By stealth here is also relative: it is too obvious for everyone to see in the local communities where such processes happen, but in their scattered being, these individual instances may not be that apparent to outsiders. Yet, when aggregated these small-scale instances of land accumulation may do what corporate land grabs do: they often change land use and land control extensively. Pin prick land accumulation instances often happen without the direct involvement of corporations, are most commonly driven by powerful individuals or non-corporate groups. In many communities where this category unfolded, the agrarian and ecological transformations that it caused to happen can be far-reaching, as for example transforming customary swidden agriculture-based agroecological zones into a monotonous monoculture landscapes based on individual property and farm operation, or transforming a vast grazing area of meadows and forest of a nomadic pastoralist community into single vast monoculture or a collage of small and medium capitalist agricultural or industrial forest enterprises. Where these pin prick land accumulation and grabs happen, they can lead to the undermining the integrity of the affected landscape or agroecological zone, the basis of human/nonhuman life. It essentially is the death of agrarian communities by a thousand cuts.

Pin prick land accumulation happens all the time everywhere under a generalized commodification of nature and land within global capitalism. This type of everyday accumulation is well studied in agrarian and development studies more generally. But what we are specifically interested in our study was the pin prick land accumulation associated with the contemporary land rush. This category is under-studied in the contemporary scholarship on land grabbing, with only few exceptions including Hilhorst et al. (2011), Kandel (2015), Friis and Nielsen (2016), Beban and Gorman (2017), Xu (2018), Borras et al. (2020) and Woods (2020)’ see Borras et al. 2022.

Stepping back and looking at the broader perspective and longer trajectory of land politics, our argument is that a land rush necessarily generates three streams of land accumulation or land grabs, namely, corporate land deals that are operational, corporate land deals that are non-operational (or what is popularly referred to as ‘failed’ land deal) and pin prick land accumulation or grabs. The first category gets the global spotlight, and the second increasingly becoming so too. Meanwhile, the third one is often out of the spotlight of media and academic observers partly because the instances of land grabbing, the ‘control grabbing’, is not as observable and dramatic as those that are demarcated – demarcated in the ways explained in the beginning of the paper – and does not involve well-known corporations or corporate personalities and often brokered by the central state. Pin prick land grabs are not legible enough for large-scale databanking initiatives to be able to identify and quantify land transactions that matter, at least generally speaking. And to others it may not be interesting enough because they do not involve well-known faces of global capitalism.

We further argue that the three categories of land transactions: operational, non-operational and pin prick land grabs are not only existing simultaneously, but that the three are *co-constitutive* of one another in the context of a land rush. We differentiate ‘land grabbing’ from

‘land rush’. For us, land rush is that “chaotic, relatively short-lived historical juncture marked by a sudden surge in demand for land, accompanied by an extremely speculative and competitive, often violent and convulsive transition from one set of rules on commodity and land politics to another” (Borras and Franco 2024: 3). Both land prospecting by land grabbers and investment prospecting by those who claim authority over vast tracts of land are unlikely to know what exactly constitutes a feasible combination of how much land for how much capitalist investments, where and when. It is this uncertainty that partly triggers the combined speculation and spectacularization, causing key actors in the land rush to try to get ahead of everyone to get lands or to secure investors. There is thus a tendency to deliberately make hyperbolic projections about land supply and investment possibilities that ultimately leads to many of the projected land deals to fizzle out once the reasonable and feasible level and extent of land and investments start to settle. It is for this reason that many cases of land deals are bound to not be pursued, and for those initially concluded land deals, enterprises are bound to be cancelled, withdrawn or scaled down.

The other effect of the land rush is that a wide array of actors, often non-corporate, join the bandwagon of the land scramble. The fevered frenzy. They are individual scammers, swindlers, speculators, brokers, entrepreneurs who are attracted to and seduced by the same promise of a windfall that attracted corporate participants in the land rush. They can do this illegally or legally, by stealth or openly, by force or with consent. This is the pin prick land grabs. Pin prick land transactions include distress sales, land brokering, theft, coercion, swindling, contract grower arrangements, etc., and are a key element of the frenzied land rush, yet they have rarely been examined in the context of the latter.

Pin prick land transactions in the context of a land rush can be understood in four ways. First, in capitalism, commodification of nature, especially land, is underway worldwide, albeit unevenly spatially and temporally. Before the surge that defines a land rush, there are already pin prick land transactions. These are then scaled up in the processes of a land rush. Second, state-enabled and directed commodification of land can happen through corporate large-scale or small-scale non-corporate processes. Both of these categories get a faster pace and wide reach during a land rush. Third, a state-initiated commodification of land from above through large-scale land grabs is watched by, and triggers speculation not only among the targeted corporate actors but among the general public as well. Particular individuals are lured by the spectacle of the land rush (Tsing 2000), and join the process in various capacities – as land buyers, speculator, broker, moneylender, adjudicator, surveyors, map makers, cadastre recorders, con artists who make fake documents and notaries, and all sorts of scammers, swindlers and thieves. Some of these aspects were documented and examined by Sud (2014) on land brokers and Levien (2021) on land mafia in India, and by Kroger (2024) in Brazil.

These three streams of land grabs often occur simultaneously in a land rush site at the same time. Often these three, starting and spreading ‘from below’, ultimately have their commodity transactions funnelled into corporate control often because the commodities produced from such land grab sites end up being sold to corporate buyers. These are pin pricks from below in which the commodities produced ended up in the hands of big capital anyway. Pin pricks ‘from above’ are corporate land grabs done through small-scale but numerous land transactions. This happens where the only way for a corporate actor to accumulate the necessary scale in land area is to purchase or lease or forge joint venture with individuals involving small plots of land per instance, thereby requiring hundreds or thousands of such individual arrangements in order to reach the scale required by the corporate investment.

Ultimately, the implication of our argument is that in fact we cannot fully account for and understand land grabbing – that is, operational and non-operational land deals – and their location within global capitalism without accounting for the pin prick land transactions not as independent process, but as co-constitutive of operational and non-operational land grabs in the context of a land rush. The implication of this is that analysis of processes and impacts of land grabbing – and the land rush – to be comprehensive, has to go beyond the specific corporate cases demarcated spatially, sectorally, legally, temporally and institutionally. This does not deny the relevance and significance of land plot-by-land plot analysis of demarcated cases; it only means that if we want to understand system-wide impact of land grabbing and its location in capitalism, then we need to go beyond the demarcated scope of specific cases – and focus on a broader landscape, or agroecological zone, at least.

We based our arguments on empirical cases of pin prick land transactions in Myanmar, China, Ethiopia and Colombia based on fieldwork by co-authors during the period of 2015-2023 through multiple field visits.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is one of the great epicentres of the global land rush. In the 2000s, the government started to intensify its intention of using its vast tracts of lands to attract foreign investors. It projected itself as having vast tracts of marginal and unused lands that foreign investors could develop into vibrant capitalist enterprises. Many of such lands are lands of mobile pastoralists, and are utilized in pastoralist tradition. The central state's investment prospecting initiatives met land prospectors during the period of 2008-2018, leading to a mad scramble among foreign investors to get hold of lands being offered by the government for long term leases (Rahmato 2011, Lavers 2012, Teklemariam et al. 2017, Cotula et al. 2014). During this period, the number of large-scale foreign investors increased dramatically, and so did individual speculators and entrepreneurs. The land rush that ensued were concentrated in the three states of Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia and Gambella. The state-corporate joint initiative to seize lands were clearly watched by the general public because quite immediately individuals joined the bandwagon to seize lands. This category is a combination of speculators and entrepreneurs, mostly individuals, and are generally aspiring capitalist entrepreneurial farmers. They capture plots of land ranging from 300 to 1,000 hectares.

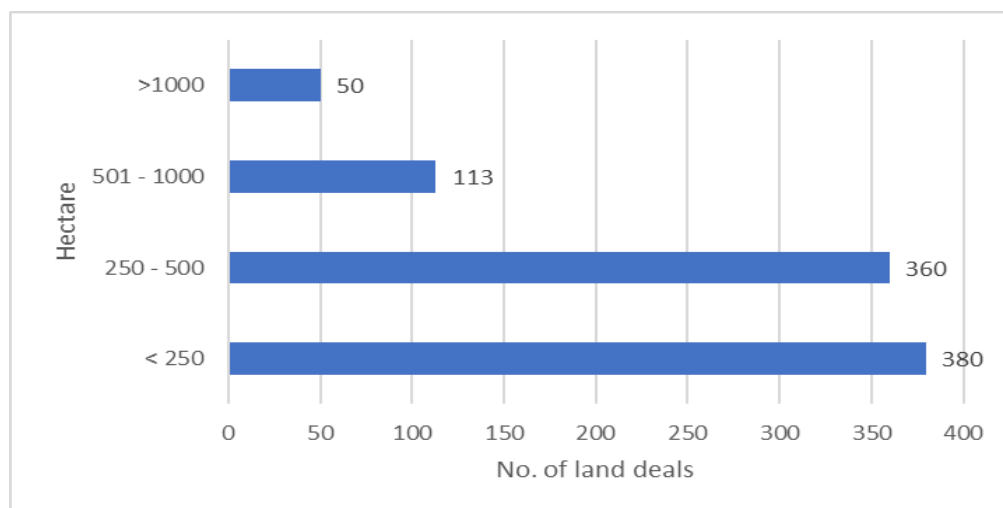
There were two generations of this individual entrepreneurs who engaged in pin prick land grabs. The first wave was dominated by individuals belonging to ethnic groups non-indigenous to the region mainly Tigrayans, at least this was the case in Gambella, took long term lease of plots of land ranging from 500 to 1,000 hectares. Most of them did initial forest land clearing in their leased land, secured loans with concessional interest from the Ethiopian Development Bank (EDB), but used the loaned money not to develop their leased lands, but for other purposes, mainly in urban areas and outside Gambella. Many of them defaulted from paying their loans.

When a government leadership change took place in 2018 that brought Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who is an ethnic Oromo to power, a new generation of land entrepreneurs seeking lands of 500-1,000 hectares has become the more common actors. The changes related to land grabs include modifications of formal procedures to facilitate the recasting of actors from foreign big corporations and a dominant ethnic group to small/medium-scale domestic investors from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Belay, 2023). Many of them sought direct lease arrangements with the government, while others leased land from the EDB who foreclosed and

took over lands of borrowers who failed to repay their loans. In Gambella, this small-scale land accumulation and grabs have in fact replaced the previous wave of large-scale land investors, and has come to dominate the process that reshaped the landscape in these three regional states. From the perspective of those who lost access to land, these pin prick land accumulation and grabs have caused the partial death of their agrarian societies. Let us take a closer look at one state.

The Benishangul-Gumuz regional state is one of the hotspot regions of government-facilitated land grabs in Ethiopia because the region has been framed in the narrative of neoclassical economics and the central state to have extensive “unused” and/or “underutilized”, and “available” land deemed favorable for more modern and industrial system of agriculture, which has shaped the central state's policy of leasing vast tracts of the region's land to investors. Land leasing for investors in the region was already in force for several years before the recent land rush that started in 2008, but it gained momentum after that. Although the land deals in the region have involved big foreign investors which in turn became the focus of scholarly research and media analysis, most of the land deals are actually deals struck between domestic investors and the state (both the central federal state and regional state). The land rush created good opportunities for those domestic elites with the necessary power and political influence to acquire agricultural investment land ‘legally’ while some of them acquired land in informal ways across the region. As Moreda and Spoor (2015: 232) noted on how this dynamic played out in the region: “By capitalizing on ambiguities and overlaps in enforcement and implementation of land leasing regulations, as well as the lack of clarity about the roles of various state actors, many domestic economic and political elites were able to use the opportunities created for their private benefit”.

These individuals involved in land acquisitions include government officials and their associates and other well-connected local elites, especially “outsider domestic elites” who are not members of the ethnic groups indigenous to the region, which is similar to the dynamics in the Gambella region. Such land deals are mostly small and medium scale (small and medium sizes in the context of Ethiopia, and as compared for example to Karuturi’s original land deal involving 300,000 hectares). Data from the regional state’s Rural Land Administration and Investment Bureau shows that out of 903 land investment deals in the region, which amount to a combined total land size of 369,610 hectares, 853 deals actually measure 1,000 hectares in size or smaller; or, 740 of the total are land deals with land size of 500 hectares and below. Only 50 land deals were with a land size of above 1,000 hectares. These numbers underscore the point that land grabs of small-scale types are actually common and massive in aggregate terms, as they would likely be in terms of their impacts on local communities and the environment. Although the land rush (the moment of mad scramble, frenzy and hyperbolic claims) in the region and country may have ended, land grabs of different sizes taking place in various ways and forms continue unabated across the region. Most of these small and medium size land deals are by aspiring capitalist farmers.



Source: Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State Rural Land Administration and Investment Bureau Assosa, July 2022.

Myanmar

The 2005-2007 and 2011-2012 rounds of ceasefire agreements between the Bamar-dominated Myanmar military and several ethnic armed organizations has facilitated widespread land grabs in territories used to be marked by armed hostilities thereby making it impenetrable or hostile for big capital. As soon as the ceasefire was in place, the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Law (VFV) became the formal state institutional mechanism that identified, acquired and reallocated vast tracts of public lands for the benefit of large-scale corporate investment. The VFV Law facilitated the capture by companies and the military of an estimated five million acres of land by the end of 2014 (Government of the Republic of Myanmar, MOALI, 2016). Civil society organizations call VFV Law the “Land Grab Law”. In the same political conjuncture, and for the same purpose of facilitating commodification of land in order to accelerate capitalist economy, the government also passed a law in 2012, the Farmland Law that calls for the formalization of individual land claims by providing official documents and land registration through Form 7. Form 7 formalizes an individual’s claim over a plot of land, demarcated and made legible. The emergence of formal land rights through Form 7 allowed for land sales and rental market to emerge, most of which is informal.

During this period, other laws were passed that will impact land politics: the Mining Act, Investments law, and Opium Crop Substitution program. The 2015 amendment to the mining law allows for the issuance of permits for prospecting, exploration, and production of minerals at different scales. A large-scale production permit can be conditionally granted for 15 to 50 years. The 2016 Investment Law has further liberalized the country's economy by reducing restrictions on foreign entities and their capital investments. It permits long-term leases for immovable assets, including land, with endorsement from the Myanmar Investment Commission. The law also allows investors to settle disputes through an arbitral tribunal court. In 2007, the governments of China and Myanmar signed an agreement on the Action Plan for Opium Substitution Program with the dual objectives of capital accumulation and opium eradication (Su & Lim, 2019). Prior to this agreement, Chinese provincial authorities had already been implementing small-scale crop-substitution interventions in areas controlled by ethnic armed groups through Chinese small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs). According to Kramer and Woods (2012: 3), the Opium Substitution Programme became a significant source for concessionary land use.

The surge of capitalist interest in land from the mid-2000s onwards, accelerated towards a land rush coinciding with ceasefire agreements and further free market reforms from 2010 onwards: ceasefire agreements and the passing of several land-related and investments laws. Corporate land grabs defined the period 2008-2018. Similar to how the land rush unfolded in other countries, in Myanmar corporate land deals came in two categories: operational land deals and non-operational land deals (or ‘failed’ land deals). Non-operational land deals became a big issue during the National League for Democracy (NLD) government because it turned out that only about one-fourth of all lands grabbed from the villagers were being used (this led to a policy around 2016 that ordered the cancellation of land concession contracts for un-used portions of land). But big corporations were not the only actors who were monitoring the opportunity for land accumulation and profit-making. Individuals, various types of military sanctioned armed militias, and individual entrepreneurs and capitalists coming from China, and Chinese Myanmar entrepreneurs having relatives in China were equally attracted to the land rush. They joined the bandwagon, and contributed to the ensuing mad scramble for land. The effect has been far-reaching.

For example, much of the landscape transformation of Northern Shan State (NSS), from biodiverse mobile agriculture to sedentary monoculture of maize, sugarcane and rubber, was not an outcome of corporate large-scale land deals. Rather, this transformation was an outcome of pin prick land grabs during the past two decades or so. Since around 2010, especially when formal land registrations were recognized, those who got their Form 7 (formal land registration) almost automatically and necessarily converted from mobile production system to sedentary agriculture largely because this was a condition for, and the intention of, the formal land titling program. Once they had the land registration, sedentarization quickly followed, leading to the unravelling of many swidden agriculture agroecological zones and landscapes. Forces of commodification were quick to enter the process, offering loans and forging contract farming arrangements. It did not take long for the owners of capital: agriculture input suppliers, moneylenders and traders to engage in land control grabbing, taking over the land of those who defaulted in paying loans, or grabbing various forms of value in the commodity chain. This is the political economy of how maize monoculture came to dominate the landscape of NSS within a short period of time (Borras et al. 2020, Woods 2020). It was the same pin prick land grabs, the same logic that led to the emergence of rubber and sugarcane monoculture, although in this latter two, the Opium Substitution Program served as a catalyst for land speculators and grabbers to engaged in pin prick land grabs in ways that was not always in small-scale 5 acre-ish size of a prick, but could be several hundred hectares of village lands each time being seized by armed militias. For example, the Department of Agriculture reported 11,433 acres of sugarcane cultivated under the auspices of this program for the 2021-2022 growing season in Lashio district alone, exporting 325,118 tons of sugarcane to China (DoA, 2023). The landscape of NSS today is a patchwork of monoculture of maize, rubber, sugarcane and walnut trees – putting a decisive end to centuries old of swidden agriculture in many places, undermining the material basis of human/nonhuman life in these agroecological zones as villagers were compelled to shift to chemical-based sedentary monocultures that are important parts of the supply chain for the global industrial food system (McMichael 2013).

Meanwhile, in the adjacent Kachin State, in 2006, cultivation of banana for commercial purposes was introduced as part of China's opium substitution program. This program set the stage for various forms of pin prick land grabs and land accumulation to gain momentum in a short period of time. In less than a decade, mainly through pin prick grabs, an estimated 170,000 hectares of banana plantations suddenly emerged and dominated the once biodiverse landscape under customary land tenure (Hayward et al., 2020). The Yunnan provincial

government provided funding for the program to benefit agribusiness companies and small-scale entrepreneurs from its province, while the Myanmar government provided land that it arbitrarily designated as vacant, fallow and virgin land. The state took lands from smallholder and marginal peasants who practiced customary tenure system for generations, and seized lands of those who fled their villages due to the armed conflict between the Myanmar military and Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Some lands within the territories controlled by the main ethnic armed groups fighting the central state army have also been converted into banana plantations with consent from the ethnic armed organizations. These largely pin pricks ‘from above’ were done by entrepreneurs and the state through a combination of theft, deception, threats, coercion, force and negotiation (LSECNG, 2019). Pin prick grabs ‘from below’ were generally spontaneous bandwagon effect of the generalized land rush in Myanmar. But this atmosphere was also aided and enabled by government and international development institutions that encourage market solutions to people’s impoverishment. Thus, the government, international development organizations, and the general atmosphere of the land rush, villagers were encouraged to lease their customary land plots to banana entrepreneurs (Lone & Cachia, 2021). The process usually involves working with a middle broker from a different ethnic minority group, who in turn deal with the banana capitalists, usually coming from China. Each individual villager is dealt with separately, with one broker handling up to four villagers. Contracts are written in Myanmar language, which the Kachin villagers may not be able to read well. Income from renting out land for banana cultivation is often insufficient to reinvest in other economic activities of the household.

Colombia

Colombia, land grabbing and violent conflict are intertwined throughout much of the country’s history (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Vargas, 2017; Grajales 2021). What we are interested in is the historical conjuncture of during the past two decades, the period of contemporary land grabbing, but seen as part of longer historical cycles, as Edelman and Leon (2013) explained.

We have carried out field research in Altillanura, and this is what this section is about. The eastern Altillanura region in Colombia refers to an area of approximately seven million hectares, encompassing the entire department (akin to a province or state) of Vichada and parts of Meta (the municipalities of Puerto López, Puerto Gaitán and Mapiripán) (DNP 2014). In a 10-year period, roughly between 2004 and 2014, the Altillanura was the epicenter of an unprecedented surge in land demand (Arango 2021). Newspapers reported numerous attempts at land deal making by a myriad of foreign and domestic companies, as well as by individual investors, fascinated by spectacular productivity claims – typical of land and commodity rushes more generally (Borras and Franco 2024; Hightower 2018; Mountford and Tuffnell 2018). Several other actors joined the bandwagon, including politicians, former paramilitary commanders, land brokers, beauty queens and powerful economic groups (El Tiempo 2011; Gómez Fonseca 2013; Portafolio 2010; Semana 2008, 2010).

The Altillanura first made it to the center of national attention in the early 2000s, after former president Álvaro Uribe launched an ambitious plan to transform the area into a key agribusiness power (see Ministry of Agriculture 2004). The plan identified the circa seven million hectares as a seeming vast and empty land, readily available for the taking (Arias 2022; Ayala et al. 2018; Díaz 2016a, 2016b; Estrada Álvarez, Moreno Rubio, and Ordóñez Gómez 2016), arguably in opposition to the Amazon – whose tropical rainforest have been termed as a major obstacle for land investment. But, as Rojas (2022, 2023) has rightly put forward, both the Altillanura and the Amazon are in reality one “corridor” of rich biodiversity, and the same is

home to different peasant and ethnic communities struggling for a piece of land and a decent livelihood. While the media coverage of large corporate operational land deals contributed to an appreciation of the scope of the contemporary land rush in the Altillanura (Contraloría 2012; La Silla Vacía 2013), several other instances of land grabbing, of the pin prick type, remained invisibilized – so as their implications for different peoples and the environment.

Indigenous peoples at Laguna Grande and La Reforma in La Primavera, Vichada are suffering the consequences of rising land dispossession, amid the contemporary land rush. Most of the lands they are in (an approximate of 7,400 hectares) are, at the same time, disputed by different middle-size cattle ranchers and business people engaging in monocrop plantations. Members of the communities reported that while the number of private land plots or fincas might not have changed, the actual owners of these fincas might have dynamically changed. In the last two decades people from outside the region, coming from the capital and other larger cities, started to arrive in La Primavera in search of land (Dinero 2011). As a result, existing cattle fincas and others were taken over by new owners, many of which have expanded the geographical area of the original land plots and transformed their land use. A finca can more or less be the size of the UAF (Agricultural Family Unit or Unidad Agrícola Familiar) in a given department. UAF refers to the economically viable plot size enough to guarantee basic income to one household, and is different for each department according to agroecological conditions (GOC 1994). Across the Altillanura, 1 UAF could be 2,000 hectares of land a finca, due to poor land quality (i.e. soils are highly acidic) in the savannah, and because of the geographical isolation of the region (Ministry of Agriculture 2019). These UAF-based plots tend, in turn, to be the unit of land market transactions. Pin prick land accumulation in this part of Colombia occurs through the capture of such units. Many speculators buy a unit or two, but others buy plenty (Arias 2018; Bermúdez Liévano 2013; Contraloría 2012), and thus, when aggregated, these individual instances of land accumulation, generally triggered by the land rush, could be quite extensive.

Don Otoniel is one of the many such new landowners in the area. At least 19 families of the Sikuaní indigenous community (an overall population of 120 people) live in informal shelters in the lands he appropriated. According to their testimonies, while Don Otoniel “allowed” them to stay in the area, families are prohibited to work the land beyond a demarcated perimeter he has established for each family to live. Due to these restrictions to a right of way, indigenous are unable to practice traditional life-affording activities like hunting and foraging, and neither they can access water sources easily (e.g. moriche swamps). Additional constraints imposed by other new landowners, besides Don Otoniel, include the prohibition to transit across different fincas, which used to be part of the indigenous traditional paths (caminos reales), and so indigenous must take longer ways to reach their destination.

In order to reach the main road, one must pass through the fincas, opening padlocks. They tell us not to disturb [the private owners]. We can't enter the savannah on the other side because it has different owners. [...].

There are many private farms around, you can't go hunting deer, armadillos; one must look around for small animals. We are forbidden to go through the roads we opened. In the past we didn't face these problems, now we do. I have to go around for 6 hours avoiding having to go through the fincas. When you go through the fincas, it takes an hour and a half.

In the last 20 years there have been other owners and they come with other ideas. When I grew up things were very different; you couldn't see the fences. These were open plains and nobody said anything, but now there are threats, you can't go inside a "private property". On most of the fincas around, there are new owners because the previous ones sold. Those who have arrived are very different!

Most young indigenous have turned into migrant workers, due to the challenges faced in accessing land. "The older children are working outside to be able to eat". Many lack their own means of transportation or are unable to pay for public transport fees, and so they must walk long distances until they reach nearby towns or fincas for work. On the few occasions when indigenous are employed, they are hired on a temporary basis. Many complain about the exploitative working conditions:

When they go out to work on other farms, they are usually told to put up fences, wires, to fertilize paddocks, sow pastures, and clean the pigs' shit [...]. Sometimes they work from 5am to 8pm and they only get 20,000 COP (around 5 USD), no matter if it rains or shines.

There are several fincas around here: 'La Rubiera', 'Tierra Macha', 'San Jorge', 'San José', 'El Porvenir', 'El Peligro', 'La Llanerita', 'La Aldea', 'La Cobera', 'Chaparral' and 'El Caimán'. These fincas were created somehow recently [...]. They [our children] have to work on Saturdays and Sundays, too. If they don't show up on Sundays they get a memo. Mostly the men go out, but the women also work on fincas washing clothes and cooking, mopping; they are paid 30,000 COP (around 7 USD).

To date, indigenous peoples at Laguna Grande and La Reforma strive to survive in a few hectares of land, cornered (embotellados) in their own ancestral territory. The same is true of other indigenous in the area, whose lands have been grabbed by visible corporate actors running operational land deals (Arango 2022). Only one out of the 19 families has access to electricity; the majority of them live with petroleum lamps. Most kids' stomachs are swollen, as a symptom of hunger and malnutrition. Improvised shelters are covered in mosquitos, due to the lack of access to water sources for different reproductive activities like cleaning. In essence, as one member of a local NGO put it: "we are witnessing the destruction of the indigenous peoples in the eastern plains."

China

In China, pin prick forms of land deals are closely associated with certain patterns of rural land institutions. The current pattern of farmland redistribution to rural households is traced back to Household Responsibility System (HRS) (Unger 2002, Ye 2015). Under this reform, although the property rights of land still belong to the village collectives, the user rights were contracted to individual villagers. Ensuring fairness, different types of farmland (best soil in the plain, hilly and rocky marginal land, sloping lands, etc.) were distributed across households in an egalitarian manner: meaning, each household gets a share of the best, good and not so good lands. This required division of land into tiny plots. This resulted in a fragmented, patchwork type of landscape in rural China. Later, when capitalist investments were encouraged to enter in the rural economy and agriculture, it was not easy for companies to seize and accumulate lands through rentals simply because of the enormous number of households with very tiny plots of many types of land. This sets the institutional stage on how pin prick land grabs and accumulation would evolve, especially amid backdrop of crop booms in southern China,

especially sugarcane, tobacco, tree nuts, eucalyptus, banana, and others (Borras et al. 2018). The global land rush that erupted around 2008 has gained momentum in southern China despite near-absence of scholarly research with very few exceptions (Xu 2019, Wang and Xu 2022).

The dominant type of pin prick land accumulation that has emerged in southern China is pin prick land accumulation ‘from above’ where large-scale corporate capital try to capture extensive lands by securing assistance from the local governments and other state enterprises to persuade individual plot owners to enter into contract with them individually. This way even when one company would be dealing with thousands of individual contracts with each contract merely involving 5 mu, or 10 mu (less than a hectare), they could orchestrate a large-scale operation. This is encapsulated in the case of the eucalyptus tree plantation boom in Guangxi province (Xu, 2020). In Guangxi, the rise of the eucalyptus tree plantation sector started in the early 2000s as part of the state-promoted “Grain for Green project”. Later, with the involvement of domestic and foreign capital, the sector expanded rapidly and massively. In order to acquire land for the construction of the eucalyptus tree plantations, those investors need certain channels to acquire land, including leasing large-scale forestland from state-owned farms and rural collectives and contracting land from individual villagers (Xu, 2018). The latter channel, albeit a less favoured one for investors due to high transaction costs, contributed to investors amassing land during the eucalyptus boom. To give an example, one villager that one of the co-authors of our paper interviewed in Hepu county in Guangxi leased 10 mu forestland to Stora Enso (a Finnish paper-pulp company) for 30 years at an annual rent of 30 yuan per mu. Before leasing the land, he had planted eucalyptus trees on the land for two years. Thus, the trees planted there were also sold to Stora Enso at the price of 2000 yuan per mu. He decided to lease out the land and sell the tree planted because of the remote geographic location and poor infrastructure. Imagine thousands of individuals like him having a separate contract with Stora Enso (and the other foreign company, Indonesian-Taiwanese, engaged in eucalyptus plantation is the APP). The general estimate is that between Stora Enso and APP, they got around 120,000 hectares of land for eucalyptus plantation in Guangxi province, mostly through pin prick land accumulation ‘from above’ (Xu 2020).

Another sector that witnessed extensive pin prick land grabs has been the sugarcane sector. In this case, villagers retained nominal ownership of their plots, but big capital managed to grab control of the land, land use and the commodity produced out of these plots. This is illustrated in the sugarcane sector boom in southern China through the government’s “Double High” (Shuang Gao) project, a state-promoted land consolidation project for large-scale mechanized sugarcane plantations. Under this project, small-scale land plots were leased from rural households to investors, including specialized companies, rural cooperatives and individual entrepreneurs. Then, these small land plots were combined into large operating units with heavy subsidies from the local governments. In one of the villages we visited in Fusui County in Guangxi, around 10,000 mu of land from 240 rural households has been contracted to two specialised companies for sugarcane production, respectively. In this village, “the majority of villagers are willing to transfer (lease) land... [we] only worried about the possible delay of the payment from the companies”. The villagers’ willingness to lease their land is related to the availability of relatively better paying wage work opportunities in urban areas. However, there are also few rural households that do not want to lease land. According to one villager, when villagers’ children are small, they prefer to farm at home while taking care of their children than migrate out. For those who do not want to lease out their land, many of them would be persuaded by companies and local government to exchange their plots with others to allow for company to be able to consolidate a bigger continuous single demarcated land, thereby allowing for mechanization and industrial irrigation. This is a nationwide phenomenon of ‘land

consolidation' project, than alongside what is called 'land transfer', which usually mean, individual households leasing their plots to owners of capital where the main mechanisms through which pin prick land accumulation has proceeded in many parts of China (Ye 2015)

Finally, we also see pin pricks 'from below', and this is mostly among villagers. Some villagers, especially those village elites, are able to accumulate land at the expense of their neighbours and kin during a crop boom, or indeed, the land rush. For example, with the eucalyptus boom, a few villagers acquired land from their fellow villagers based on their advantageous access to resources, usually in the form of labour, capital and social network resources (Xu, 2018). these villagers gained access to land via extra-economic and economic channels in order to establish eucalyptus tree plantations. Their land access is based on multiple pin prick land accumulation, each can be as small as 0.5 mu – but add up to hundreds of mu of land control in total (ibid.: 146).

Death by a thousand cuts: concluding discussion

When big corporate capital, often in alliance with the state, seize the means of production and social reproduction of working people (peasants, pastoralists, fishers, Indigenous peoples) – land, water, river, lakes, seas, forests, grasslands, wetlands, minerals, and so on – in particular places and conjuncture, the outcomes almost always lead to the death of agrarian societies, abrupt or protracted but death most likely, often in torturous manner, whether through overt or what Michael Watts calls 'silent violence' (Watts 1983). This is what makes the contemporary global land grabbing that has been ongoing for the past 20 years and steered by big capital and central states quite alarming. But what makes it even more problematical is that the timing in the stage of global capitalism (its crisis of overaccumulation) and the crises it generated, which in Fraser's term, generated by capitalism 'non-accidentally' (Fraser 2021). Global land grabs reflect the inseparable structures and institutions of exploitation by class, oppression on the basis of social difference (race, ethnicity, gender, generation, religion, caste, nationality), and ecological plunder (see e.g., Mollett 2016).

We have two inseparable main arguments in our paper, namely, that pin prick land grabs do the same negative impact in societies in terms of the character and extent of such impact, and that pin prick land grabs emerged co-constitutively with corporate operational and non-operational land deals. Yet, this form of land grabs has been so invisibilized that it could be just as dangerous as, if not even more dangerous than, its corporate counterparts. In the remaining part of the paper, we will discuss about the invisibility of pin prick land grabs, the dispossession to the means of production and social reproduction that they cause, landscape transformation, undermining the integrity of agroecological zones that sustain human/nonhuman life, difficulty in governance, and challenges in framing political struggles.

Invisibility Cloak

The very character of pin prick land grabs, that is, the microscopic instance of a pin prick makes it difficult to be immediately visibly. But it is the dominant lens in analyzing contemporary land grabs that is too corporate- and large-scale oriented that provides the invisibility cloak over the pin prick land grabs. If and when seen from scattered, individual instances of pin prick, they do not have the scale to sound the alarm bells. When a land broker grabbed control of 2 hectares of land from a villager, it does not attract attention of media or land grab watchers. When a land entrepreneur acquired one unit of UAF (economically viable plot) from an owner of a finca in Colombia, it is considered as a normal everyday market transaction, and no one

bothers to raise an issue. Pin pricks thus could proceed by stealth. When their aggregated scale becomes visually noticeable, these are usually not considered as something irregular – no top-level government intervention, no big corporations the presence of their logos in a village are enough attractions to media. By the time the impact is visually obvious, their momentum and spread are already quite advanced. But with the dominance of corporate and state land grabs lens in defining when a land deal becomes a land grab, there is difficulty in seeing this scaled pin prick land grabs as land grabs, especially in cases where there is no single dominant specific company involved. This blinder is reinforced by the methodology of large-scale databanks on land grabs because this type of land grabs does not easily allow one to be able to check all the required information boxes in case profiling (e.g. land grabber, how many hectares, etc.). No one will want to enter into a large-scale international databanking initiative a land purchase transaction involving 2 hectares of land in Kachin state, or a single finca purchase in Colombia, or an entrepreneurial aspiring capitalist farmer leasing a 300 hectare plot of land from the Ethiopian Development Bank, or a one-third of a hectare lease contract from Stora Enso eucalyptus plantation in Guangxi province of China. Stricter corporate-oriented databank quantification that put qualifiers such as: 1,000 hectares and above, violation of human rights of affected villagers, dispossession and displacement, and so on helps ensure that pin prick land grabs remain invisibilized. Hence, the pin prick land grabs that transformed Northern Shan State, Kachin State, Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, Altillanura in Colombia, and Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia and Gambella in Ethiopia as we have discussed in this paper have remained invisibilized, and when they were noticed, they do not enter standard land grab databanks. And because they do not enter land grab databanks they are further invisibilized in policy, political and academic works that partly rely on quantified data on land grabbing.

Dispossession of means of production and social reproduction

Many of these pin prick land grabs take control not only of lands for production (farmland, grazing land) of peasants, pastoralists and others, but also lands that the villagers have access to for producing both exchange value and use value: community forest that serves as storm surge protector to the village, source of forest products generally for use value, community playground for children, spring water, landing rights to access lake and river, open access grassland for household animals to forage and graze, and so on. Thus, pin prick land grabs result in the dispossession of villagers of the means of production and social reproduction. There are two ways through which grabbers take control of the means of production and social reproduction, but that often such acts are not generally perceived as land grabs. First is they take only part of the means of production – partial grab of farmland or grazing land in ways that are not generally considered in the literature and public debates as constituting land grabs. In some ways the sentiment about land grabbing tends to be about how much was left, rather than how much was taken – along the notion of justice in many agrarian societies that James Scott has noted (Scott 1976). Second, pin prick land grabs happen in lands over which villagers have no individual claims – thus, generally the commons (Dell’Angelo et al. 2017, Agrawal et al 2023). For example, individual grabbers took over the open access grassland or community forest of the village, but when you ask the villagers whether they lost land to land grabbers (knowing that land grabbers took control of the forest and grassland), the villagers we interviewed in many of the research sites have answered that they did not lose land. There is the dominant narrative that to for someone to lose something should be predicated on that someone having individual private property ownership of that lost land. This cannot be generalized, but it is an observable trend in many of our research sites. Corporate land grabs make the most negative impact when these result in the dispossession of the villagers of their means of production and social reproduction. But when this is done through pin prick land

grabs, even when it has the same effect substantially and by extent, it is seldom seen as land grabs. But pin prick land grabs result in widespread dispossession of the means of production and social reproduction, at least based on our fieldwork research in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Colombia and China.

Landscape transformation

Corporate land grabs transform social relations around and institutions of property that in turn transform the corresponding landscape; or vice versa. There is nothing inherently negative (or positive) in a transformation of landscape and social relations around property. But the contemporary corporate-driven land grabs have transformed landscape and social relations in it into something negative, that in turn undermine the integrity of agroecological zones that sustain human/nonhuman life. Transforming a biodiversity landscape into a monoculture, and property relations based on commons with individual use rights separated by boundaries that are porous, malleable and flexible into something freehold alienable individual private plots almost always result in the strategic undermining of any remaining material basis for sustaining life both for humans and nonhumans: in the specific context of industrial capitalist agriculture, sedentary farming means dead soil that require continuous use of more poison and other synthetic inputs to artificially produce commodities; monoculture means the destruction of biodiversity and means deforestation. This is what is meant by Fraser's idea that capitalism has caused climate change 'non-accidentally' (Fraser 2021). The multiplier, spill-over effect of a corporate land grab that transforms landscapes into monocultures, and flexible and less inequitable social relations around property into monopoly by a few of landed property result in the destruction of societies in these landscapes. What we argue in this paper is that pin prick land grabs could, and have done exactly the same destructive transformation of landscapes and the destruction of agroecological zones – but has generally been invisibilized. The stories we presented about the allocation of a tiny demarcated and isolated resguardos (Indigenous settlement) in Colombia that has not enough basis to reproduce human/nonhuman life, the transformation into monocultures of expansive landscapes in Myanmar, the transformation of landscapes in China and Ethiopia are all tales of the strategic undermining of the integrity of agroecological zones by a thousand pin pricks.

Challenges for governance and framing political struggles

The scattered acts of individual pin pricks make them amorphous, almost formless, until they reached a point when their collective impact demonstrates huge visible images such as a once biodiverse landscape dramatically transformed into a monoculture. How do you govern scattered individual acts that take an amorphous form and are generally invisibilized? The answer is not straightforward; it is extremely difficult to govern these processes. The character of pin prick land grabs – as a necessary element of the land rush and extension of the logic of capital – reminds us about the importance of approaching localized and sectoral social issues like this from a system-wide perspective. Capitalism is at the core of global land grabbing; it is the main driving force. It is difficult to think of how to prevent or govern this vicious type of land grabs if we just narrowly treat them as localized, individualized, random agrarian problems, in the way that local environmental issues cannot be addressed well without connecting these issues to system-wide questions as argued by Fraser (2021). It is a similar argument that we make in relation to political struggles. How can social justice struggles address such individualized, amorphous, widespread issues of land grabs in order to prevent or rollback pin pricks land grabs? It is unthinkable to address them sufficiently without embedding them in system-wide analysis of and struggles within and against capitalism. The

issues brought about by pin prick land grabs are complex, and these render governance and framing of political struggles difficult and complicated – and all the more necessary and urgent to take this type of land grabs seriously.

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