

Land grabbing, conflict and agrarian-environmental transformations: perspectives from East and Southeast Asia

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Plantations and intergenerational displacement

Tania Murray Li

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BRICS Initiatives for Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS)

Email: bricsagrarianstudies@gmail.com

Websites: www.plaas.org.za/bicas | www.iss.nl/bicas

MOSAIC Research Project

Website: www.iss.nl/mosaic

Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI)

Email: landpolitics@gmail.com

Website: www.iss.nl/ldpi

RCSD Chiang Mai University

Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University Chiang Mai 50200 THAILAND

Tel. 66-53-943595/6 | Fax. 66-53-893279

Email : rccd@cmu.ac.th | Website : <http://rccd.soc.cmu.ac.th>

Transnational Institute

PO Box 14656, 1001 LD Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Tel: +31 20 662 66 08 | Fax: +31 20 675 71 76

E-mail: tni@tni.org | Website: www.tni.org

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My contribution to this panel highlights the intergenerational dynamics of displacement from the land, the kind that one can observe by examining what happens in a plantation zone over a period of 30 years or more. I will make three points. 1) about the nature of displacement. 2) about the triple displacement associated with emergent labour reserves. And 3) about land allocation policies that ensure (if not actually plan) landlessness in future generations.

What is a land grab?

The term land grab suggests an abrupt act of dispossession: rural people lose access to the land they were farming previously, and may also be evicted from their homes and villages. Such grabs do occur, and they generally entail direct violence – rubber and fruit trees destroyed by bulldozers, houses burned or otherwise destroyed, and protesting villagers chased off or threatened with jail, under laws of trespass.

But violent grabbing of this kind is costly: it has material costs (bulldozers need to be hired, police or military units deployed, and paid daily allowances). It also has political costs: depending on the regime in question, it may expose corporations to negative press coverage, and expose government officials to popular criticism (for failing to protect people) or to criticism from their superiors (for creating a media spectacle, and failing to manage the people in a harmonious and efficient way).

In Indonesia since the fall of Suharto, direct grabbing accompanied by eviction has become much less common. Officials are afraid of being “human right-ced”: accused of rights violations that bring themselves and the whole of government into disrepute.

More common now are approaches that attempt to gain the consent of villagers to the arrival of corporations upon their land. Even in Suharto’s time, consent was preferred, because the rationale for expanding plantations is that they bring development and prosperity to the people. Rejection by the people throws this rationale into question.

Why would people concede to their exclusion from land they formerly used, and to which they hold customary rights?

A) they may feel – or be made to feel – that those rights are insecure. Lacking documents, they cannot resist.

B) the promises made about jobs, and especially about infrastructure – are attractive. In current rounds of land acquisition by oil palm companies in Indonesia, customary landholders agree to release land because they are desperate for access to roads, without which they cannot access schools, health services, markets, and other elements they associate with national membership and a modern life. Loss of land is the price they must pay for a road.

C) the company does not plan to evict them, and does not take all their land: typically, settlements are “enclaved” – left intact, surrounded by some farm land, perhaps enough for one generation. There may still be primary forestland in the vicinity – land on which they might expect to expand in future, as the population expands and a new generation needs land to farm.

It is only later, when the enclaves prove too small to accommodate the needs of the new generation, and surrounding forestland is full of plantations, that the grab is finally experienced as a permanent and complete loss of access to the possibility of farming.

As one elder in my research site in Kalimantan explained “when the company came we thought our land was a big as the sea”. But more companies came. Now his children and especially his grandchildren are landless. They are marooned in a sea of oil palms in which they have no share, and no means of gaining a share, since the price of land in the enclaves and residual pockets of non-plantation land is very high, far beyond their means.

The experience of being landless in an oilpalm zone is especially painful because farmers with access to land for smallholder oil palm can prosper – with 6 ha they can send their children to college.

For young and old alike, it is obvious that oil palm smallholdings are far more lucrative than any other options (wage work on plantations, or work as low-paid civil servants).

The young do not wish to abandon farming, but they have no access to it. They look back on the deals made by their parents and grandparents, and are bewildered by them. Somehow, they believe, their elders were tricked or coerced, or were simply foolish and naive: it is hard to acknowledge that the elders conceded to an arrangement that made it impossible for their descendents to farm.

2 A triple displacement

Becoming landless has implications of labour: while earlier generations on land frontiers were not obliged to work for plantation corporations, since they still had access to land to farm, the younger generation is more constrained. They must seek work, but the plantations are not obliged to employ them.

This is the double displacement: when the land is needed, but the people are not. Oil palm only employs one worker per 4-10 hectares. Plus, plantation companies prefer to import migrant workers, who are fully dependent on plantation work, hence more easily disciplined.

The third displacement is a gendered one: only healthy young men can do the strenuous work of oil palm harvesting, and for this, companies prefer migrants who will work reliably every day. Maintenance work, gendered female, is classified as unskilled. It can be done by landless women from the enclaves tucked around the plantations.

Hence men and women are displaced from their families: men from the enclaves must migrate out to find work elsewhere, leaving their wives and daughters to do casual work on the plantations; migrant men must leave their wives and children behind in other islands, while they labour alone in the plantation zone, seeking money to remit.

3 Planned landlessness?

It is not clear to me whether oil palm companies that come to saturate an oil palm zone anticipate the benefits of accessing cheap labour from women tucked into enclaves between plantations. There is no evidence that this is a deliberate strategy: the stated target is acquiring land, not labour.

Minimally, it is wilful ignorance. Regional governments issue more and more plantation licenses without considering the land needs of the existing and future population: each license is treated as a one off, and so it goes until the land is full.

This happened historically in Sumatras plantation belt: pioneer plantations started up around 1870, and more were added until by 1942 plantations covered an area of 1 million hectares in an almost contiguous block 60km by 250 km.

Colonial authorities did not restrict plantation expansion with a view to preserving land for the indigenous population, now or in future. Similarly, there is a massive gap in todays spatial plans. According to data from the Civil Society Coalition for Fair and Sustainable Spatial Planning,

14.4 million hectares of West Kalimantan

4.8 million hectares are owned by 326 oil palm companies

1.5 million ha = 651 mining companies

3.7 million ha 151 timber companies

In sum 70 percent of West Kalimantan's total land area – is controlled by 529 companies. plus, a further 3.7 million ha = protected

Leaves .7 million ha for 4.3 million people . Even so, the local government remains committed to converting a further 1.5 million hectares for oil palm plantations.

Read more:

<http://news.mongabay.com/2014/0424-Hadinaryanto-palmoil-kalimantan.html#ixzz3c5PFVyg5>

Enter on this scene another massive program: the revamped Department of transmigration (now called the ministry for villages, development of backward regions and transmigration) has announced a plan to bring in 4 million transmigrants from java to West Kalimantan in the next 5 years, and allocate them 9 million hectares of land.

Stuffing the land with transmigrants is a disaster for the local population: they lose access to their customary land now and any hope for land access for the next generation. It is also a guarantee of landlessness for the transmigrants themselves.

Under transmigration plans, each household is allocated just 2 hectares of land. Even if the land is fertile and they manage to hold onto it – not guaranteed – the next generation will be effectively landless. Plus, transmigration settlements are targeted for the borders around oil palm plantations, further entrenching an in situ, future, landless labour reserve.

In colonial thinking, the benefit of bringing in transmigrants who would become landless in future generations was explicitly announced. As noted by the Deli Planters Association :

If it should be the case that the number of settlers increases as a result of having many children, gradually the land granted them will be inadequate to provide their subsistence - in other words, if a sort of overpopulation and poverty develops, then the surplus will have to seek work on the estates and thus the desideratum will be achieved - a local labour pool (1932:15 cited in Stoler 1995:214n23).

Today, plantation and transmigration planning guarantees the landlessness of future generations as an apparently unplanned by-product. The concept of a land grab does not quite capture this process: it is more insidious, and involves a long time horizon.

The implications for politics are these: a piecemeal, gradual and step-wise process of displacement is much harder to contest than an abrupt and catastrophic one. It creeps up on you. It is uneven – some communities – and some families within communities – may still have land, while others have none.

The idea of future landlessness as the fate of the next generation seems abstract until it happens to you – the kind of thing village elders and spatial planners should worry about, but apparently do not.

By the time it happens, it is too late. The land has gone, and would take a major struggle – against corporate control over land, against a government that releases land to corporations and against other people – notably transmigrants - to get it back.

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International Conference Paper Series

The purpose of the 2015 Chiang Mai conference is to contribute to *deepening* and *broadening* of our understanding of global land deals, resource conflict and agrarian-environmental transformations – in the specific regional context of Southeast and East Asia, with special attention to climate change mitigation and adaptation policies as well as the role of China and other middle income countries (MICs) within the region.

The Conference Paper Series aims to generate vibrant discussion around these issues in the build up towards the June 2015 conference – and beyond. We will keep these papers accessible through the websites of the main organizers before, during and after the conference.

About the Speaker

Tania Murray Li is Professor and Canada Research Chair in the Political-Economy and Culture of Asia, University of Toronto early research in Southeast Asia concerned urban cultural politics in Singapore. Since then she has focused on culture, economy, environment, and development in Indonesia's upland regions. She has written about the rise of Indonesia's indigenous peoples' movement, land reform, rural class formation, struggles over the forests and conservation, community resource management, and state-organized resettlement. Her book *The Will to Improve* explores a century of interventions by colonial and contemporary officials, missionaries, development experts and activists. *Powers of Exclusion* examines agrarian transition to see what happens to farmers' access to land in the context of competing land uses (e.g. conservation, urban sprawl, plantation agriculture). Her 2014 book *Land's End* tracks the emergence of capitalist relations among indigenous highlanders when they enclosed their common land. Her current writing project is an ethnography provisionally titled *Living with Oil Palm*. It explores the forms of social, political, cultural and economic life that emerge among people in the orbit of this massively expanding plantation crop. Future work will focus on the problems faced by people who are pushed off the land in contexts where they have little or no access to waged employment.