

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

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## ***Discussion Note No. 8***

‘Tok’uaj and the disappearing forests: a tale about how  
forests mapping and conservation can counteract the  
advancement of the agricultural frontier’

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Once upon a time, there was a territory located in the north of Argentina, on the north-east of the province of Salta. It was covered by forests worldwide known for their ecological and cultural diversity, which were part of a larger biome known as “el gran chaco”. For hundreds of years, indigenous peoples like the Wichí had lived as subsistence hunter-gatherers in the “chaco”. Their communities were physically concentrated along local rivers, but they moved around collecting timber and non-timber forest products, which were sold to passing traders and in far away towns.

In the late nineteenth century, several small-scale cattle ranchers from European descent, known as creoles, arrived into the region. They grew subsistence crops and roamed their cows under the standing trees. They were mostly concentrated on Argentina’s “chaco” western border, following a non-paved road that stretched into neighbouring Bolivia. Very rarely the Wichí and the creole entered into conflict: land was abundant and the Wichí’s resource extraction sites did not overlap with the creoles’ grazing spots. Their forests, legally speaking, belonged to somebody else. The Argentinean government held in property large forest tracks and others had a long time ago been granted to the military or the church.

One evening of a hot summery day, Tok’uaj, the leader of a small group of Wichí families was sitting next to a water spring. Tok’uaj and his relatives had spent the day hunting. Next to them, Francisco guided a small group of cows that were desperately drinking water after a few days roaming the bush where Francisco had settled 40 years ago. Suddenly, they heard a sturdy noise: a bulldozer was chopping down the trees nearby. Land was getting ready for “economic development”. It was the late 1980s, and the expansion of the agricultural frontier in northeastern Argentina had aggressively begun. Thousands of kilometres further south, the historically grazed and cultivated “pampa” was becoming an agriculture dominated landscape, thus pushing extensive cattle ranching further north. The bulldozer was one among many opening fields to an increasing number of arriving ranchers as well as to new agricultural developments, for corn and beans first, and for soy cultivation later (Cáceres, 2015).

The economic value of Tok’uaj forests had never been greater. Absent landowners sold or rented their properties to farming entrepreneurs and, in only one decade, soy plantations and corn fields turned to occupy one third of the Wichí’s and the creoles’ traditional territory. Many of the Wichí’s hunting spots disappeared, while an increasing number of creoles moved eastwards. The once dense dry forests were either deforested or increasingly degraded and land disputes between absentee landowners and creoles, and between creoles and the Wichí became then common rule.

However, in November 2007, Argentina’s government passed a law to regulate the management and conservation of the country’s native forests, and asked each province to initiate a land-use planning process. The process was aimed at classifying the country’s provinces forests into three categories: a first category –colour coded in red- aimed at protecting areas of high conservation value, where only subsistence activities could be developed; a second category, yellow, was aimed at including forest ecosystems of “medium” value, which could only be used sustainably and only following strict management plans; a third category, in green, identified lands that could be deforested after a publicly overseen impact assessment. The Argentinean state was aligning itself to international conservation efforts under the UN climate and biodiversity conventions, to reduce deforestation and degradation nationwide. The government had plans to get support for such efforts in international carbon markets, and to develop new national financial mechanisms that would pay landowners for the provision of sustainable ecosystem services, such as biodiversity and soil conservation.

Tok’uaj and Francisco became then spectators of a top-down provincial land-use planning process that went on for almost a year. The process was riddled with conflict (Seghezzo et al. 2011). Landowners and agribusiness firms shouted that the process was a clear federal attempt to hamper provincial “development”, which would violate private property rights if yellow or red areas ever overlapped with private properties. Conservation organizations advocated for a deforestation

moratorium, and they remarked that the Wichí and the creoles deserved access to new policy programs for developing sustainable land management projects. For the provincial government, conservation mattered but the future land-use map had to make room for further deforestation in the name of economic progress. Amidst one of such discussions, Francisco stood up and constructively said:

*“I’m here to denounce that since we were pushed toward the eastern forests, into the “chaco”, we struggle to find water for our cattle and we fight with the Wichí over forest use. Now we have also heard that a new drought-tolerant soy will be released soon so we welcome our land to be coded in yellow if it helps protecting us from a new process of land enclosure...”*

Immediately after, Tok’uaj spoke in Wichí:

*“I owe my name to my ancestors. Tok’uaj was the name of a Wichí hero who helped the Gods in granting us with water and who taught us about the arts of fishing and hunting. My ancestors lived in this territory you now aim to paint in colours. None of you have ever considered us legitimate owners of this territory despite we have lived here for hundreds of years. And this is what I came to stand up for: recognition. Our children are dying from the poison agricultural plantations are throwing into our rivers; we need medicines and need access to schooling so that we can combine our indigenous knowledge with knowledge that can help us bring back the animals we now do not find. We do not need to paint our forests to do that; we need instead to raise your awareness about our livelihoods and maybe a land title if that helps us getting your support”.*

The finally approved provincial land-use map coded 1.5 million hectares of native forests in green and another 4 million hectares in yellow and red. Discussions about such coding continue as of today, and the map may be revised soon again, with uncertain outcomes. Over the period 2009-2013, deforestation in northern Salta slowed down but continued to be one of the highest of the whole Latin American region, despite soybean prices and lower profit rates reduced considerably the advancement of the agricultural and cattle frontiers (Vallejos et al. 2014).

This tale cannot end on a depressing note. Tok’uaj and his community are now involved in a formal land rights titling process led by a social organisation, which affects both private and public lands coded as red areas. There are signs from the provincial and federal governments that a land title will soon be granted to them, but such title will be tied to the specific management conditions that the provincial land-use map establishes. Francisco is working with a conservationist organization to develop a land-use management plan for his remaining “yellow” forests.

Our friends’ life expectations are now more encouraging than they were before the land-use law was passed in 2007. The emergence of a conservationist legal framework, coupled with increasing political activism of indigenous rights organisations, activist academics and the environmental movement has helped to counteract an extractivist agrarian development, which encouraged by new technological packages was going to threaten a larger share of the remaining native forests.

And, as we say in Catalan when a children’s tale comes to an end, “here you have a cat, there you have a dog, and finally the story is gone”.

## **Some academic ramifications**

What I just read you contains imaginary and real information, and my purpose was to present you with

a case in which agrarian change and environmental conservation dynamics interweave and influence each other. Their intersection is reworking the political ecologies that existed in the Argentinean north-western forests previous to the law and the ensuing planning process. On the one hand, agrarian development can still proceed apace at the expense of informal land managers and of local “green” forests, thus deepening social exclusion and changing ecological dynamics. On the other hand, an increased degree of protection for native forests requires rethinking how Tok’uaj and Francisco have now access to their resources. As you know well, conservation regulations can also create winners and losers among the Wichí and the creole peoples.

My tale also suggests that agricultural frontier dynamics cannot be decoupled from an understanding of other political and social opposing forces, in this case Argentina’s efforts to develop provincial forest conservation plans under the REDD+ mechanism. Such perspective brings new actors to the analytical front, and future of the frontier and the native forests will on how these two opposing “movements” are able to negotiate and leverage different kinds of power. The advancement of the frontier will continue to depend on agricultural markets and technological deployments, but also to which conservation policy becomes enforced and its actors insensitive to economic development pressures. Additionally, it will also depend on how effective land rights devolution programmes are, and whether the “new” right-holders are able to avoid the temptation of short-term economic profit, for example selling their titles, or renting their land to agricultural entrepreneurs.

This last point takes me to another important message I would like to convey: indigenous peoples and conservationists have been allies in resisting the advancement of the commodity frontier, but such alliances have resulted partly from a previous process of dispossession. The strength of this alliance remains to be seen as new resource access relations in response to land-use planning are devised. What if the Wichí, in the light of their difficult livelihood conditions, reproduce more intensive models of subsistence agriculture as they become further integrated into markets and formal property rights structures? How would conservationists react and understand indigenous rights then? Insights from recent interviews indicated me that while there was a discursive battle between “visions of development” in the land-use process, another battle regarding “what the Wichí and the creoles’ culture ought to be” is likely to emerge soon.

Finally, I would like to remark that conceptualizing REDD+ programs as a new form of “global green grabbing” could be problematic in some instances. This is not to deny that the implications of re-crafting access relations in ways that jeopardise local development for the benefit of new actors who do not live off the land, such as distant consumers of carbon indulgencies or conservation brokers, should not be studied and denounced –I have done so myself (Corbera, 2012; Corbera, 2015) but to highlight that REDD+ efforts can also in some cases serve as a platform through which previously disenfranchised actors can articulate acts of resistance. In cases like this, it is worth paying attention to the many actors REDD+ involves, and both the processes it unfolds and is aimed at confronting.

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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.

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### About the Speaker

**Esteve Corbera** is a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Environmental Sciences and Technology (ICTA), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and a Research Associate at the School of International Development, University of East Anglia. His research focuses on the governance of land-use management options for climate mitigation across scales, including analyses of climate-policy and biodiversity conservation related instruments, such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) and carbon offset projects, and more recently also of large-scale agriculture for biofuels production. He is a member of the Editorial Boards of the journal *Global Environmental Change* and the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, and has been both a lead and a co-author in the 5th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.