



# Grounding traffic: The cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras



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## ABSTRACT

This paper uses a global commodity chain (GCC) framework to explore the nexus of illicit economic activities and rural change. We unpack the micro-level economic processes by which a *de facto* land grab in eastern Honduras' Moskitia region was catalyzed and accelerated by the region's ascendance as a global hub of cocaine transit (ca. 2008–2012). We show how 'narco-brokers' mobilized a long-standing economic infrastructure to harness land and labor in the service of moving drugs, and how these 'mid-stream' activities captured millions of dollars from the cocaine commodity chain. We detail the processes by which those dollars ultimately concentrated land among *in situ* and *ex situ* elites by profoundly distorting social relations around land governance, labor, food production, and—ultimately—land ownership. The result was widespread dispossession, land and resource privatization, increased food insecurity, community conflict, and increased social stratification. Lands transferred from resident smallholders to elites helped to (a) integrate the region horizontally into Honduras' rentier-based cattle economy, and (b) improve the vertical integration of the pan-hemispheric cocaine trade through the speculation and profit-laundering services that the region's enclosure provided. This case highlights how economic coercions work synergistically with the more well-studied role of overt physical violence in frontier land grabs. We urge greater attention to the role of illicit capital in agrarian transformation globally. The study also points to the potential for transit spaces to shed much light on the workings of (illicit) global commodity chains and illicit economic geographies more broadly.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the global phenomenon known as “land grabbing” has catalyzed a vast literature to understand its roots, dynamics, and long-term implications for agrarian futures (see, e.g., Borrás and Franco, 2012; Edelman et al., 2013; Hall, 2013; Pedersen and Buur, 2016). In Latin America, monopolization of rural land by state actors, domestic elites and transnational corporations has been profound. While land concentration in the region has deep historical roots (Edelman and León, 2013), its pace and scope appears to have accelerated since the financial crisis of 2008 (Borrás et al., 2012; FAO, 2014).

Several efforts are underway to track and measure these land deals (e.g., GRAIN, 2016; Land Matrix, 2018), but they are acknowledged to significantly underestimate the amount of land that has been

transferred from smallholders and communities to elites and corporations. In the case of Latin America, this is in part because of the absence, partiality and informality of many of the region's land registration systems (Campbell, 2015; Gould, 2014; Latorre, 2015). The problem is further compounded by what appears to be a significant number of extra-legal (and therefore particularly opaque) ways in which legitimate businesses acquire and legitimize land (Farthing, 2017; Mollett, 2016). Moreover, some share of land transfers are deliberately obscured because they are financed by illicit<sup>1</sup> capital, often derived from participation in the cocaine commodity chain (CICIG, 2016; De Sanctis, 2017; Maldonado Aranda, 2013; Richani, 2012).

Not surprisingly, there are no estimates of the regional extent of the ‘narco-signature’ in land grabs—and thus no real sense of the degree to which agrarian change is shaped by the economies that arise from the prohibitory logics of the ‘war on drugs.’ But a disparate—and

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<sup>1</sup> Following Abraham and van Schendel (2005), we understand ‘illicit’ to mean that which is illegal *and* socially unacceptable.

growing—literature on this topic collectively suggests that profits derived from involvement in the illicit drug economy can significantly catalyze and/or accelerate the dispossession of peasants, indigenous, and Afro-descendent peoples from coveted frontier landscapes (McSweeney et al., 2017; Richani, 2012). These are lands that have already been under tremendous pressures from state and corporate ‘development’ of all kinds. But the narco-enriched seem collectively able—with money, guns, and impunity—to quickly extend private property relations into landscapes that legitimate actors can be less able or less willing to openly acquire. This facilitates subsequent ‘legitimate’ land-grabbing by state interests and by corporations.

Our own contributions to this corpus have been to tease out different elements of the ways in which U.S.-led drug policies (and the interdiction approaches they support) shape the nexus of illicit capital, socioecological transformation and agrarian change in Central America, where the role of drug trafficking (*not* drug crop cultivation) in frontier transformation is relatively recent and arguably profound (McSweeney et al., 2014, 2017). In the course of our prior work, however, we have repeatedly hit up against several unresolved tensions in how we and other scholars/practitioners understand how the links between drug trafficking and agrarian change play out on the ground (see also Aguilar-Støen, 2016; Raineri, 2018). We feel that these tensions merit further attention if we are to better understand how and why particular people and places are vulnerable to land grabbing in the presence of drug trafficking, and how these dynamics might be addressed, whether through bottom-up forms of resistance or global regulatory changes.

The first tension relates to the question of *how*. Much work has drawn important attention to the central role of physical violence in land- and resource-grabbing in sites of drug trafficking—the infamously brutal violences associated with the business of cocaine smuggling itself, and/or the brutal and even genocidal tactics of complicit state/para-statal counter-narcotics forces (e.g., Ballvé, 2012; CICIG, 2016; Grajales, 2011; Kerssen, 2013; Ybarra, 2018). The latter—typically U.S.-funded—are often explicitly tied up with elite actors’ desire to secure natural resources, territories, and labor: a process that Paley (2014) terms “drug war capitalism.” Relatively little attention, in contrast, has been paid to the role of other, deeply interrelated forms of violence that are at play in criminal land acquisitions, particularly in the form of economic coercion. This includes the ways in which drug traffickers offer jobs and services to impoverished rural communities already subject to the structural violence of the global economy (OAS, 2013b; UNODC, 2012), even as those economic enticements lay the foundation for widespread dispossession and physical violence. It also includes the ways in which bribery appears to be overtaking overt physical violence as the means by which drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) build territorial, economic, and political power (McDermott, 2018). Thus despite the infamous “plata o plomo” (money or a bullet) warning used by narcos to get what they want, we still know much less about how that putative choice plays out in the context of the rural frontiers through which traffickers typically operate.

A closely related tension relates to how smallholders—indigenous or otherwise—negotiate their agency in a rural economy dominated by the drug business. As Ballvé (forthcoming) notes, “...every narco-frontier is an extension of a much longer frontier lineage of colonial (or neocolonial) exploitation, political marginalization, and racialized geographies.” In this context, some accommodation of drug traffickers can be essential to the continued survival of communities, even as it imperils smallholders’ livelihoods by enabling land enclosure (Grandia, 2012; UPINMH, 2016). Existing analyses of this dynamic seem sharply drawn between those that emphasize either the “victimization” or “criminality” of rural residents (cf. Grandia, 2012). There seems to be underexplored potential in thinking beyond these categories and instead working through the messy, quotidian ways in which residents negotiate their options within the constraints and imperatives imposed

by narco-capital and those who leverage it. Key to this approach, we suggest, is to ‘follow the money’: to analytically prioritize how ‘dirty’ money circulates in everyday life and can be “grafted into long-standing vernacular spatial practices” that lead to particular forms of dispossession (Raineri, 2018: 22), while profoundly shaping the prospects for community resistance and land restitution (Hall et al., 2015; cf. PRISMA, 2014).

The final tension revolves around *where*—why particular places are subject to these processes, and how they are related. To date, narco-fueled land-grabbing has been explored in detailed case studies of disparate ‘hot-spots’ from Brazil to Mexico (see McSweeney et al., 2017). There is now a need to reconcile the specificity of those cases with a more relational approach that understands them as parts of a deeply interlinked process of agrarian change.

This paper addresses these challenges through a novel application of ‘global commodity chain’ (GCC) analysis to a moment of rapid land ownership transfer and land cover transformation in the Moskitia region of eastern Honduras. Well-studied by geographers and renowned for its predominantly indigenous population (of Miskitu, Pech, Garifuna, and Tawahka), the Moskitia (also known as La Mosquitia, Muskitia) loosely corresponds to the easternmost department of Gracias a Dios (~17,000 km<sup>2</sup>, or about 15% of Honduran national territory). Within Honduras—the second-poorest country in the hemisphere—the Moskitia stands out as the country’s poorest region with appallingly low levels of health service and education provision reflecting decades of systemic state neglect (Arce et al., 2018). Over approximately five years (ca. 2008–2012), the region became the “primary landing zone” for most U.S.-bound cocaine out of northern South America (INCSR, 2012). The region’s ascendance was the unsurprising result of the well-known “balloon effect,” by which interdiction “successes” do not reduce trafficking but simply move it elsewhere—in this case, from the eastern Caribbean, Mexico and Guatemala, towards eastern Honduras. The subsequent tsunami of cocaine transshipment through the Moskitia coincided with a surge in “anomalous” deforestation—i.e., forest clearings that in their pace, extent, and pattern pointed to the land-seizing activities of highly-capitalized actors operating with complete impunity in indigenous commons and protected areas (McSweeney and Pearson, 2013; Sesnie et al., 2017).

To understand the processes by which drug trafficking enabled this *de facto* land grab, we focus on the years of peak land transformation (ca. 2008–12) (see Sesnie et al., 2017). We choose this time period because it captures the ascendance of the Moskitia as a major international drug transit hub, but predates the arrival of sustained joint U.S./Honduras military counter-narcotics operations (Shanker, 2012), which by 2013 had reduced the flow of cocaine through the region by diverting traffickers elsewhere. At the same time, the drug war militarization of the Moskitia initiated a period marked by an increase in homicides, harassment of community members by police and military units, and the killing of four Miskitu civilians in a DEA/Honduran military counterdrug operation (Jackson, 2015; OIG, 2017; Pachico, 2013). Our GCC-framed analysis tracks the infusion and circulation of cocaine capital *prior* to that period of intense state-led violence, when by contrast the economic coercions associated with the cocaine “boom” were most visible and arguably particularly important for their transformative impact on relations around land ownership. We also show how those transformations served to horizontally integrate the region more directly into Honduran agribusiness and into the pan-hemispheric drug economy, which simultaneously ensured the perpetuation of land-grabbing after much of the drugs were re-routed elsewhere.

In the next section we elaborate on our GCC framing, which provokes six questions that organize our findings. We conclude by suggesting how the study might inspire closer attention to the role of illicit capital in land grabbing globally, and, complementarily, more scrutiny of transit spaces in the study of (illicit) economic geographies.

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