



## The urban land debate in the global South: New avenues for research



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### ABSTRACT

The global 'land grab' debate is going urban and needs a specific conceptual framework to analyze the diverse modalities through which land commodification and speculation are transforming cities across the globe. This article identifies new avenues for research on urban land issues by drawing on an extensive body of academic literature and concrete cases of urban land transformations in Asia, Latin America and Africa. These transformations are analyzed by focusing on three types of urban investments – investments in property, investments in public space and public services, and investments in speculation, image building and 'worlding' – and the way these investments are intermingled with and enhanced by processes of gentrification and speculative urbanism. Addressing real estate and infrastructure investments, speculation and gentrification through a land-based lens allows us to deepen the discussion on urban land governance in the global South. We argue that urban land acquisition cannot be thoroughly understood in isolation from the workings of urban real estate markets, public policies, and displacement processes. The urban land grab debate needs to consider the dialectic interplay between land use change and general socio-spatial transformations both in central – or recentralized – and peripheral areas. This is why we plea for a kaleidoscopic perspective on urban land governance by uncovering the complex patchwork of urban land acquisitions and their diverse temporalities and spatialities, their hybrid character in terms of actors involved, and the multiple and often unpredicted ways in which urban dwellers try to gain control over and access to urban land.

### 1. Introduction

The urban transition that is currently under way in Africa and Asia has urged scholars in the political economy of land markets to shift focus from rural land governance to urbanization. One of the academic debates in which increasing attention is paid to urban land markets is the 'land grab' debate. Originally concerned with massive land acquisitions in rural areas in the global South, scholars progressively assess the impact of large-scale land deals in cities (Zoomers et al., 2017). The debate on the effects of the rural global land grab focuses on externally driven and large-scale land investments fueled by the global food-fuel-energy crises as well by broader developments such as climate change policy; it is also dominated by notions of direct and indirect displacement, enclosure of the commons and food insecurity. Policy discussions on land grabs often evolve around land administration and formalization; the recognition of customary land rights; compensation and resettlement (and the lack thereof); and participation and free, prior and informed consent (see other articles in this special issue).

Whereas the rural land grab debate traditionally focuses on large-scale land acquisitions of at least 200 ha (Zoomers, 2010), it is

increasingly taking into account the effects of a multiplicity of smaller land deals and the involvement of a large variety of actors, including domestic and smaller scale investors (Zoomers and Kaag, 2014; Hilhorst et al., 2011). This also means that urban processes of land-based transformation are slowly gaining increased traction in the debate, which is arguably also fueled by the renewed dominance of urban policy agendas (Parnell, 2016). However, the urban land grab tends to be more fragmented, gradual and therefore less visibly-outstanding than most of the rural examples. It includes a patchwork of different activities – ranging from land use change to regeneration and redevelopment as well as to new-built and commercial gentrification – with the common objective to appropriate land and to increase its value.

One important difference between rural and urban land grab debates is that discussions over urban land easily conflate with debates over new urban reconfigurations and gentrification processes, or what is often referred to as the urban transition (Shin et al., 2016). Hence, urban land acquisition cannot be thoroughly understood in isolation from the workings of urban real estate markets, public policies, and displacement processes. The urban land grab debate needs to consider the dialectic interplay between land use change and general socio-

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spatial transformations both in central – or recentralized – and peripheral areas. At the same time the concept of gentrification is not precise enough to interpret the variety of current exclusionary urban processes and the important role that land plays in these developments. While the gentrification debate primarily addresses processes that take place on a given urban surface, the land grab debate aims to understand urban transformation processes specifically through the lens of land-related dynamics.

Since the urban transition is more and more acknowledged as an important source of land transformation, it is important to find out what ‘inclusive’ development means in this context. Defining and measuring inclusive development in the context of land deals might become even more complex in an urban or urbanizing context: the myth of homogeneous and territorially fixed ‘local communities’ is easily debunked, and a variety of populations – with various degrees of mobility and diverse interests – make meaningful participation and benefit sharing challenging. In addition, understanding land investments in (peri-)urban contexts requires looking into the long term processes of urban change and the more indirect modalities of displacement and land grabbing, which make it even more complex for urban and peri-urban dwellers to demand their right to the city.

Urbanization rates in the global South demonstrate an urgent need for the careful mapping of both urban land and real estate sectors in and around urban areas and for broadening the scope of the original land grab debate to include (peri-) urban processes. Hereby we aim to shape the outline for the ‘urban turn’ of the land-grab debate, in which a comparative perspective is central. We depart from this perspective based on the plea that has become louder over the last decade for comparative urbanism on the basis of urban notions that stem from cities in the global South.

This article reviews some of the primary academic findings on urban land transformations in the global South by exploring land acquisitions, capital-driven evictions and displacements in urban or emerging urban areas, speculative urbanism as well as the unintended processes of gentrification. It specifically focuses on the processual features of the urban land grab in order to identify new avenues for research on urban land investment and their issues of inclusiveness and participation, and to broaden the discussion of well-studied rural land transformations. Drawing on an extensive body of academic literature on the urban land debate in Asia, Latin America and Africa, the article provides an in-depth understanding of the diverse modalities through which land commodification and speculation are transforming cities across the globe. Studies from each continent are used to complement the debate on the urban land grab. We ask: How can the concepts of gentrification, speculative urbanism and world city making enhance the urban land debate and bring more complexity into thinking about inclusive development and participation? To what extent is speculative urbanism – a concept derived from studies on urban developments in Asia – also useful towards understanding new urban developments in Africa and Latin America? Finally, how can gentrification – a concept more often applied in a Latin American context – be a way to analyze local socio-spatial consequences in cities in Asia and Africa?

We engage with these questions throughout the next sections of the article. We start with a brief overview of urbanism in Asia, Africa and Latin America and by identifying diverse processes of urban transitions and land transformations in and across the continents. Afterwards we reflect upon the concepts of land use change, gentrification, and speculative urbanism which come into place when we zero in on the specific dynamics of urban land grabs, changing land values in cities in the global South and their meanings in terms of urban land governance. In the discussion we analyze these urban dynamics by focusing on three types of urban investments – investments in property (land or real estate), investments in public space and public services, and investments in speculation, image building and worlding. In the conclusion we reflect upon our findings and their meaning in terms of inclusive development and sustainable urban growth.

## 2. Urbanism and land transformations throughout the global South

As the global urban transition is well underway, rapid urbanization in the global South is gaining increased exposure and thus inviting both interest and concern. Indeed, Africa and Asia are urbanizing faster than any other region. In fact, until 2050 nearly 90% of urban population increase will be concentrated in these regions; by 2050, 56% and 64% of the respective populations of Africa and Asia are projected to live in urban areas (UN DESA, 2014). Meanwhile, Latin America and the Caribbean are already largely urbanized with about 80% currently living in cities (UN DESA, 2014). As it is known to be the region where the ‘first’ urban transition is now completed (UN-Habitat, 2012; Klaufus and Jaffe, 2015), it is relevant to consider what could be learned in hindsight from these rapid transition processes.

In general, increased urbanization is still often seen as a main condition for sustained economic growth, and cities as key sites of capital accumulation. On the other hand, a multitude of social, environmental and institutional problems or even ‘crises’ are often highlighted when conceptualizing urbanization in the global South (most often expressed in relation to the proliferation of slums). According to the UN World Urbanization Prospects report, “as the world continues to urbanize, sustainable development challenges will be increasingly concentrated in cities, particularly in the lower-middle-income countries where the pace of urbanization is fastest” (UN DESA, 2014: 1). In order to meet the challenge of ‘inclusive, resilient and sustainable’ cities and to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 11, enormous investments in housing, infrastructure, energy, and economic development are expected to be mobilized over the coming years (Zoomers et al., 2017). This focus on urban development in academic, policy and media circles is on the rise due to the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) and the adoption of the New Urban Agenda.

An increased interest in what has been coined ‘planetary urbanization’, understood as a worldwide spread of urban forms, lifestyles, mobilities, media, etc., has brought to light the lack of theoretical and methodological clarity in conceptualizations of the urban. The world is increasingly made up of highly differentiated, discontinuous and complex urbanization landscapes, thus making it difficult to delimit urban areas in simple ways or to separate the urban and the rural (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Brenner, 2013; Brenner and Schmid, 2014). At the same time, urbanization and urban transformation processes have created a dominant meta-narrative when talking about planetary change. By delving into issues of land governance and land-based transformations and by asking ourselves how a traditionally ‘rural’ debate can enlighten our understanding of the ‘urban’, we aim to contribute to a more complex understanding of the spaces commonly classified as rural, peri-urban or urban in spite of their hybridity. Across the globe, globalization, and changing models of urban governance have left their imprint on the urban landscape, especially with regard to changing land use and its social consequences. Land commodification and speculation relate directly to land use change that is enabled by public policies: real estate markets and infrastructural works not only heavily influence ground rents, they also define who can share in the benefits of rising land prices (Smith, 1996; Smolka, 2013).

Sheppard et al. (2015) frame these processes in terms of ‘neoliberal urbanization’ and ‘urban revolutions from above’: as part of western urban agendas and ideas, the postcolonial world has moved increasingly towards privatization of public services, urban entrepreneurialism and inter-urban competition as key to economic growth. As global cities imaginaries – or ‘world city making’ (Roy and Ong, 2011) – have become dominant in urban policy, urban development has been highly influenced by global finance companies, international financial institutions and global consultants, which have actively promoted cities for the rich. Worlding goes hand in hand with image building – the illusion of success projected onto the future – and city branding. The framing of

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