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Threats to sustainable development posed by land and water grabbing

Jampel Dell'Angelo[1,2], Paolo D'Odorico[3] and Maria Cristina Rulli[4]

Since small-scale farmers manage most of the cultivated land worldwide, the ongoing shift in systems of production associated with large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) may dramatically reshape the world's agrarian landscape, significantly impacting rural populations and their livelihoods. The societal, hydrological and environmental implications resulting from the expansion of large-scale agricultural production, through LSLAs, make their ultimate sustainability questionable. This study, through a literature review, analyses the negative impacts of LSLAs, their hydrological dimension and how they may affect the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The core literature on land and water grabbing is reviewed and systematized using the 17 SDGs as a framework, in order to highlight the relationship between LSLAs and the sustainable development agenda. The magnitude of the global land rush phenomenon and the criticism raised in scholarly research highlight the controversial role that transnational land acquisitions may be playing in the global development agenda.

Addresses
[1] Department of Environmental Policy Analysis, Institute for Environmental Studies, VU University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[2] National Social Environmental Synthesis Center, University of Maryland, Annapolis, MD, USA
[3] Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA
[4] Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy

Corresponding author: Dell'Angelo, Jampel (Jampel.dellangelo@vu.nl)

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Introduction

Sustainable development — the harmonization of economic, social and environmental aspects of development, benefitting current generations without compromising the capabilities and opportunities of future ones — is a key organizing principle of governance [1]. Despite having certain intrinsic logical contradictions, it projects an outline for a globally shared trajectory and vision for society; in 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the resolution: 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (UN, 2015). The Agenda represents a plan 'of action for people, planet and prosperity' organized through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets [2]. All countries and stakeholders are encouraged to work toward ending poverty and hunger, protecting the planet from environmental degradation and promoting prosperity and peace through international partnerships.

Asides from this, a group of social movements, grassroots organizations, civil society organizations and NGOs formed the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles to address major social and environmental concerns about land and water grabbing. They called on international governmental organizations, States and local authorities to safeguard and to act in the interest of local communities, to take action against land and water grabbing and to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Global Convergence promoted its declaration against water and land grabbing during the climate justice initiative organized during the COP21 in Paris in 2015, with the motto 'Water and Land: same plight same fight!' [3].

There is concern over the fact that the number of transnational land investments and large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) has increased to unprecedented levels [4]. The phenomenon has attracted the attention of international development organizations, U.N. agencies and civil society while simultaneously triggering scholarly debates [5–12].

It is argued that there are different potentially positive impacts that could result from LSLAs. Development opportunities, rather than land fees and other types of financial transfers associated with the acquisitions, are often described as the primary benefits. It has been pointed out that land concessions are generally granted by host governments in exchange for infrastructure

development, employment opportunities and know-how transfer commitments [6]. Potential benefits for the rural poor include: construction of rural infrastructure, schools and health posts, new jobs and employment opportunities, farm and off-farm activities, the spread of new technologies and increased food production resulting in greater availability in local markets [13,14]. However, there is little evidence of the positive impacts of LSLAs and the literature has generally focused on their negative aspects. The lion's share of peer-reviewed publications on the topic often explicitly speak of land grabbing's negative connotations, highlighting the social, economic and environmental impacts of LSLAs that negatively affect rural development.

Through a review of the literature on LSLAs we map the negative implications of large-scale land investments based on the SDGs framework, while raising awareness that land and water grabbing can compromise the success of the SDGs agenda. In this paper we synthesize the emerging body of literature on LSLAs and land grabbing with the intent of connecting and commenting on the threats of LSLAs to the SDGs agenda. We explicitly aim to synthesize the negative aspects of LSLAs as a diagnostic description of the symptomatic aspects of what has the characteristics of a global change 'syndrome' [15]. We review the key elements of the debate on land and water grabbing and then illustrate the main hypotheses relating to the dynamics of the phenomena and discuss its drivers. We also discuss the main methodological challenges and knowledge lacunas in the field. Finally, we focus on how LSLAs can potentially threaten progress toward the SDGs by highlighting their critical and most problematic aspects. We conclude by emphasizing the need for the land and water grabbing debate to be mainstreamed into the global sustainability agenda, to support global action and dialogue surrounding LSLAs.

Global land grabbing?

The recent global economic and food security crisis, the adoption of new bioenergy policies and the investment opportunities in land resources are often described as the triggers of the escalation in transnational land investments. The unprecedented increase in transnational land investments, that peaked in 2008, has been described as a new 'global land rush' [11,16,17,18•,19–24]. In an attempt to understand the nature of this phenomenon several authors have investigated and described possible drivers, causes and dynamics. This phenomenon is associated with two main interrelated transformations: a small number of companies and actors controlling larger concentrated extensions of land [25–28] and a global agrarian shift from traditional, local, small-scale systems of production to large, intensive, commercially oriented agricultural models [28,29•,30,31,32•]. National and international actors and dynamics are subject to a series of changing contexts, forces and emergent processes that affect land control. There are a variety of players in this process, ranging from local actors such as national elites that include business figures, civil servants, politicians and community chiefs or leaders to multinational corporations that mobilize financial capital [22,33]. The people affected by land grabbing, usually consisting of small-scale farmers, pastoralists, indigenous people and those who traditionally used the land, often react to dynamics of dispossession by engaging in different typologies of conflict ranging from physical violence to initiatives of mobilization and contestation that often find the support of social movements and NGOs [24,34].

A combination of factors, on multiple levels, drive transnational large-scale land investments and acquisitions. A generally accepted understanding is that, in the context of a globalized world, food and energy crises and the fast growing demand for agricultural commodities represent the underlying forces for this phenomenon [22,35]. However, according to different authors and different typologies of studies, some dynamics and drivers are more significant than others. Key drivers identified are: financial land speculation and competitiveness of inputs and production costs [19,22], availability of water resources [18•,36••,37,38], and bioenergy development opportunities [39–42]. Moreover, several contextual factors have been studied to determine which conditions favor LSLAs. Focusing on the investor side, aspects such as dependence on food imports are considered particularly important, while looking at the target countries, land availability coupled with weak governance and an absence of local land protection rights emerge as fundamental pre-conditions [43]. Public policies that address national priorities in food and energy security through support to transnational investments, incentives and international agreements are likely to have intensified the effect of these factors [6,44•,45]. Regarding higher order causality level dynamics, these are associated with globalization and neoliberal deregulation of land markets [16], shifts in geopolitical and economic relations [22], different mechanisms of accumulation and dispossession [46], and changes in land control conditions [33]. These, with the global energy transition and the need for alternative energy sources [17•], have been presented as the ultimate drivers of the global land rush.

As small-scale farmers manage most of the cultivated land worldwide [47], this ongoing shift in systems of production may significantly reshape the agrarian landscape around the world with significant impacts on rural populations and their livelihoods [14,29•,48]. The societal and environmental implications associated with the expansion of large-scale agricultural production through LSLAs bring into question its ultimate sustainability [49•] and impact society on different levels, from the household to the national level [14]. The size of the phenomenon raises substantial ethical concerns about violations of human