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GREEN GRABS  
**Good intentions  
on other  
people's land**

EGGS  
**A cracking  
opportunity**

AGRICULTURE  
AND NUTRITION

# Strengthening ties





# Good intentions on other people's land

Land grabs for green projects lock communities out of decisions about their future landscapes. Is this the cost of conserving the planet?

**T**he trend of foreign companies signing agreements with cash-hungry nations for rights over vast areas of land, leading to displacement of the land's traditional users, is all too familiar. Large-scale land grabs have swept through developing regions in the last decade, driven by a speculative mania for food crops, biofuels and water reserves. But how should we pass judgement when the land deals are designed to support global public goods, such as the conservation of biodiversity and wild landscapes?

### A return to fences

Journalist John Vidal first coined the term 'green grabbing' in 2008, when writing about a new wave of land purchases in developing countries motivated by conservation goals. Further analysis of the trend, notably in a special 2012 issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, widened the definition to include deals for carbon sequestration, forest protection and ecotourism, among others. Biofuel projects may also fall under the label of green grabs, and offer an important example to heed. By 2013, only 2% of land authorised for biofuels in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia was actually cultivated. The sector's early promise left a legacy of lost access to land for communities, with none of the promised benefits.

Green grabs are not only buyers purchasing land outright; they include any cases where rules of access to land and resources are changed to benefit green projects at the expense of existing users. However, instead of pitting small-scale local production against large-scale commodity production, green grabs complicate the land issue by setting production against protection of the environment. In doing so, green grabs are rekindling debates on the co-existence of people and nature that stretch back many decades.

Since the colonial era, local farmers, herders and hunters have been perceived as environmental threats. Authorities have given apparently empty land over to conservation, heedless of its customary uses. However, over recent decades, conservationists have learned that most schemes fail without local participation, and that communities really can be stewards of the land as much as users of it. However, in an intensified atmosphere of crisis





with unusual alliances of private capital, governments, international organisations and consumers taking on the defence of the planet, some of the lessons seem to have been forgotten.

### Adventures in carbon

If there is one element that sums up the dilemma, it is carbon. One currently favoured solution for mitigating carbon emissions is biochar, charcoal made by burning biomass under low-oxygen conditions, which can be ploughed into soils as a long-lived form of carbon storage that also improves fertility. While some ventures are implementing biochar as a small-scale technology, others have sought to raise capital for biochar feedstock plantations on millions of hectares of “under-used” lands in Africa. In fact, farmers themselves regularly enrich their soils with waste organic carbon, including biochar, as recorded in rings of fertile black soil around many

West African villages. Practices like these draw little appreciation as ‘green technologies’, however, and there is a lot of space to recognise and support the highly efficient carbon-mitigating potential of smallholder farmers without taking large chunks of the landscape out of their hands.

The most land-grabbed country of the past decade is Papua New Guinea (PNG), where companies had acquired more than 5 million ha of former customary land by 2011. A big share of this was snapped up by carbon speculators following promising negotiations towards the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD) standards in 2007. More than 90 carbon trading deals on customary land were under negotiation, but within two years almost all had stalled. In the end the great majority of the millions of hectares acquired in PNG have been used for short-term logging. Difficulties with securing community and legal consensus over long periods of time mean that potentially green projects with distant time horizons have lost out to quick extractive forestry.

Plentiful examples of such failures feed scepticism of green grabs, highlighting the mismatch between long-term green goals and the turbulent world of land deals. In 2008, Liberia nearly signed an agreement with a British company to hand over 400,000 ha of forests to be conserved for carbon trading. The leaked draft contract specified that all forest resources in the area must be left intact, and defined forest resources as “anything of practical, commercial, social, religious, spiritual, recreational, educational, scientific, subsistence, or other potential use to a human that exists in the forest environment, not limited to flora, fauna, or micro-organisms.” This was an excellent catalogue of the comprehensive use local communities derived from their forests, albeit for the purposes of revoking their access. In fact, if local users had interfered with the carbon value of the scheme, the Liberian government could have been liable to the British company for billions of dollars in lost revenue. After the contract was leaked, and the lack of benefits for the country itself became obvious, Liberia stopped the deal.

About one-third of Tanzania’s land is currently under some form of protection for wildlife, a trend which proliferated in the 1990s during a hopeful phase of community-based conservation of grazing lands. However, poor implementation of this approach led international donors to withdraw funds and the government to favour more direct state management of wildlife. Subsequently, many villages that initially accepted conservation as a community-led use of their land are seeing the benefits go to the tourism industry, while the costs – including lost pasture and crops damaged by wild animals – impact on the village. Some communities have entered into beneficial ventures with ecotourism operators, most successfully in Maasai villages of Lolindo, where well-coordinated local authorities have negotiated and invested earnings in village infrastructure, social services and conservation. Others have lost their land altogether to companies that find it easier to sign private leases for tourism areas.

Clearly, similar motivations – to conserve unique ecosystems, to make them available to ecotourists, to keep carbon out of the atmosphere – can lead to very different outcomes for local land users. What matters is how they are able to negotiate their own access to the land and its resources, and that means being there when the deal is ▶

Conserving unique ecosystems – to make them available to ecotourists or to keep carbon out of the atmosphere – can have very different outcomes for local land users



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► struck. Thus far, green land deals made without local participation have a poor track record for success, and that fact alone may be what puts the brakes on harmful green grabs. Respect for customary land users may, in the end, be better business, just as it is better conservation.

## Land beyond hectares

FAO's recently compiled Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure seem to be tailor-made for protecting communities from land grabs in countries with widespread customary forms of tenure – a system that still dominates 90% of African land. When it comes to green grabs, however, FAO's guidelines will run up against other international pressures felt by states: to increase protected areas, to save carbon stores, or to bring threatened species back from the brink. While supporting local claims to land can slow the land grabbing, the larger question remains the same as ever: how to balance local life and development with ecological needs?

Non-inclusive green grabs cut off very real synergies between development and environmental goals, leaving only tradeoffs and conflict. The most promising way forward is probably not in buying up huge areas for any exclusive function, but in finding the most benefits from the whole landscape. The emerging landscape

approach is a more sophisticated attempt to answer some of the questions that green grabs ignore. For instance, the Reduced Emission from All Land Use project of the Alternatives to Slash and Burn Partnership for the Tropical Forest Margins has looked beyond forests to emission reduction possibilities throughout four different landscapes, working with users to find incentive strategies for carbon benefits everywhere. In Efoulan Municipality, southern Cameroon, these focus on both sustainable management of communal forests and intensification of neighbouring cocoa agro-forests mixed with other useful tree species. Projects like this suggest how communities can maintain higher-carbon landscapes while maintaining their livelihoods on the land.

Climate change, deforestation, degradation and biodiversity loss are serious problems that are growing ever larger. It is easy to imagine that inclusive solutions will not be wide enough to face them, and that big solutions have to leave some people out. But the story of green grabs so far shows that greening landscapes is not as easy as just leasing land. Real progress will not be measured in thousands of hectares, but in the commitment of land users working together towards shared goals. ■

Biochar is ploughed into soils as a long-lived form of carbon storage, improving fertility and carbon-mitigating

T Paul Cox