

Land Grabbers and Food Robbers: a review
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Fred Pearce, *The Landgrabbers. The New Fight over Who Owns the Planet*, Eden Project Books, London, 2012, pp.xii + 388, £20.

GRAIN, *The Great Food Robbery. How corporations control food, grab land and destroy the climate*, Pambazuka Press, Oxford, 2012, pp.164, £14.95.

Too late?

In late May 2012, Tanzania's Minister for Land, Housing and Urban Settlements, Anna Tibaijuka, announced that she was establishing a Land Authority which would be 'responsible for ensuring that people evicted from their land to give way to investments or government uses will be handsomely compensated, according to world standards unlike the present situation.' On foreign investment, she added that 'value for invested land will be reviewed and investors will now be required to pay 25 per cent of the total land value to the government as opposed to the past.' This would 'automatically phase out the current system whereby land investors are allowed to take the whole chunk and only pay some tiny amount of money as taxes to local authorities.'¹

Fine words indeed from an experienced minister who was formerly head of UN-HABITAT, but after reading two critically important new books also published in May, I wonder whether she may be too late. And for Tanzania, read also Cambodia, parts of Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Paraguay, Patagonia, South Sudan, Sumatra and many, many more places afflicted by the current scourge of land grabbing sweeping across the world.

Fred Pearce

The books, by the environmentalist Fred Pearce and the NGO GRAIN, are both outstanding and are in many respects complementary, but they are also very different. Pearce introduces his book with these words:

'Soaring grain prices and fears about future food supplies are triggering a global land grab. Gulf sheikhs, Chinese state corporations, Wall Street speculators, Russian oligarchs, Indian microchip billionaires, doomsday fatalists, Midwestern missionaries and City of London hedge-fund slickers are scouring the globe for cheap land to feed their people, their bottom lines or their consciences. Chunks of land the size of small countries are changing hands for a song. So who precisely are the buyers – and whose land is being taken over?' (vii).

¹ 'Tanzania: Country Urged to Reduce Land Lease Period to Investors', *allAfrica.com*, 28 May 2012
<http://allafrica.com/stories/201205290070.html>

Those are the questions that Pearce set himself to answer, and, as he told *The Observer*:

'No one has put together the global picture of land grabbing so I wanted to take a closer look...I'm an old-fashioned reporter – I want to go see. So I'd read about a big land deal in the papers and go to find what was going on. I travelled to 10 or so countries where the most egregious grabbing is taking place: [including] the savannah of Brazil, the forests of Indonesia, the inner Niger delta of Mali.'²

So Pearce travelled the globe, interviewing both those whose land is being grabbed and those doing the grabbing. He writes engagingly about many dimensions of this global phenomenon. He finds conservationists who believe passionately that local farmers or herders cannot be trusted to look after the environment. He comes across tourist operators anxious to evict locals so that visitors can enjoy pristine bush. He meets officials who believe that anything reeking of the 'traditional' must be swept aside in the name of 'development'. And he encounters all kinds of wheelers and dealers speculating on biofuels or the rising cost of farmland, or both. Globally the pictures he paints so vividly make a pretty depressing reading of a rapaciousness often decked out as 'modernisation'. There are a few bright spots, but not many, and they pale into insignificance by comparison.

In the introduction to the final part of his book, 'the last enclosure', Pearce writes:

'The world's commons are under siege. The biggest prizes for the landgrabbers are unfenced forests and pastures – and many governments are willing to sell out their inhabitants. It looks like the Earth's final round-up, the last enclosure. And with the land often comes water – a free resource being privatized. Millions of Malians suffer as their water is siphoned off for Chinese, South African and even Libyan farmers. The world's poor and hungry are losing their land and water in the name of development. Can this really be the way to feed the world?' (309).

GRAIN

GRAIN, and Pearce himself, answer 'certainly not'. In contrast to *The Landgrabbers*, *The Great Food Robbery* is not really a new book, rather a bringing together of articles published online mostly in the past two years on GRAIN's admirable website www.grain.org³ where it describes itself as a 'small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems.'

² 'Fred Pearce: Land grabbing has more of an impact on the world's poor than climate change', *The Observer*, 20 May 2012. He also visited Gambella in Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, Liberia, Paraguay, Cambodia and Jordan.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/20/fred-pearce-land-grab-interview>

³ GRAIN's daily updated site <http://farmlandgrab.org/> is essential reading on land grabbing.

GRAIN says 'the main purpose of this book is to bring these articles under one hard publication, which can be used as a reference, be distributed where access to the internet is limited, and be shared from hand to hand' (7) – certainly a worthy intention. Hopefully there are also plans to distribute the book (published in English, Spanish and French) to those who might find it most useful.

A brief survey of its 20 year history informs us that by 2000 'GRAIN's agenda shifted markedly, away from lobbying and advocacy, and towards directly supporting and collaborating with social movements, while retaining our key strength in independent research and analysis.' (15).

The Great Food Robbery is a very attractive book, A4 in size, with a number of black and white photos, tables and the odd cartoon. (By contrast, Pearce's book has just a few maps). The introduction has articles on 'time to recall the land grabbers' and 'twenty years of fighting for seeds and food sovereignty', followed by sections on 'agribusiness', 'food and the climate crisis', and 'land grabbing and the future of agriculture'.

Central to GRAIN's analysis is that 'Corporate power in the food system has grown by leaps and bounds [in the past 20 years]. Today corporations set the global rules, with governments and public research centres following their lead. The fall-out of this transformation for the planet's diversity, and the people who look after it, has been devastating.' (24). Corporate seeds are replacing local seeds across the Americas, Africa and Asia, often leading to the imposition of corporate farming by companies, a phenomenon intensified by the creation of new markets for biofuels, all of this leading to a massive expansion of monoculture not to grow food for people but in soya, timber, maize and sugar cane for industrial uses, mainly biofuels and animal feed. Governments have generally embraced these trends, GRAIN argues, implementing laws and food safety regulations 'that favour corporations and criminalise small farmers and local food systems.' (29). Meanwhile, speculation in agricultural commodities has skyrocketed in recent years, resulting in food distribution becoming disconnected from need.

There is an excellent chapter on 'the great milk robbery', illustrating how, in both North and South, 'corporations and big financial players are moving to set up mega-farms and capture the global milk supply.' (43). GRAIN notes that 'the strong alliance among the vendors, consumers and farmers of Colombia⁴ is an inspiration. Similar alliances now need to be forged everywhere, and across borders. Milk must remain in the hands of the people.' (47).

Another chapter looks at 'food and climate change: the forgotten link', arguing that 'Not only is today's dysfunctional food system utterly ill-equipped for climate change, it is also one of the main engines behind it.' (103).

⁴ Where early every morning 'around 50,000 milk vendors stream into the country's cities', delivering '40 million litres of fresh milk at an affordable price to around 20 million Colombians, who will boil it briefly at home to ensure its safety. There is perhaps no more important source of livelihood, nutrition and dignity in Colombia than what is commonly known as *leche popular* or people's milk.' (32).

Sadly, 'Hardly any African government leader has dared to speak out against the current global land grab' (137), a finding endorsed both by Pearce and in my own recent bibliographic work.⁵

The final section on 'land grabbing and the future of agriculture' ranges far and wide including how 'the high-power finance industry, with little or no experience in farming, has emerged as a crucial corporate player' because 'the world has changed in ways that make it possible to make big money out of farmland' with the result that both land and water are 'under stress as never before.' (123) Indeed:

'Land grabbing forecloses vast stretches of lands and ecosystems for current and future use by peasants, indigenous peoples, fisherfolk and nomads, thus seriously jeopardising their rights to food and livelihood security. It captures whatever water resources exist on, below and around these lands, resulting in the de facto privatisation of water.' (160).

GRAIN says it will continue to fight both for justice and for food sovereignty (a concept developed by the global peasant movement La Via Campesina)⁶ 'with many allies the world over.' (161).

The Great Food Robbery concludes with a call to 'break the shackles of the corporate agriculture and food system' (161), to ban land grabbing, and for governments to suspend all large-scale land transactions, rescind deals already signed, stop oppressing and criminalising people for defending their lands, and release detained activists.

Whatever one might feel about the realism of such a call, all those concerned about both the immediate and the long-term implications of land grabbing – and we are certainly growing in number – are deeply indebted to Fred Pearce and GRAIN for these substantial contributions to our understanding of this complex and disturbing phenomenon. Hopefully their books will have a major impact and, hopefully too, Anna Tibaijuka is not too late.

⁵ Robin Palmer, *April 2012 Annotated Guide to the Bibliographies on Biofuels, Land Rights in Africa and Global Land Grabbing*
http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/april_2012_annotated_guide_to_bibliogs_biofuels_landrights_aufrica_globallandgrabbing.pdf

⁶ According to Via Campesina, 'Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It develops a model of small scale sustainable production benefiting communities and their environment. It puts the aspirations, needs and livelihoods of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. Food sovereignty prioritizes local food production and consumption. It gives a country the right to protect its local producers from cheap imports and to control production. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, water, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those who produce food and not of the corporate sector.'
http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=27&Itemid=44