

Land grabbing in contemporary Asia: A summary of the cases

The desire to conquer new lands is far from out of date. It has simply taken on new and more complex forms. And whereas, in centuries past, it was kings, queens, and emperors leading the conquest, today it is large corporations and capitalists.

Just ask the sharecroppers in the Mirpurkhas District, Sindh Province in Pakistan. Being subjects of their landlords, they have no voice as to how the lands they cultivate should be managed and controlled. Many of them lost their livelihood when landlords began leasing out their lands to private corporations for bigger profits.

The farmers of Sto. Niño in Capiz, Philippines also found leaseback agreements to be a method that would eventually return them to their former status as daily wageworkers. The HARBCO farmers in another part of the country, Tagum, Davao del Norte, incurred massive debts to a giant corporation that has taken over their lands. For these farmers, leaseback and joint venture agreements came to define a practice that served only to perpetuate the relationship of landlord and tenant. The writers of the case study describe it as a “reversal of gains in agrarian reform.”

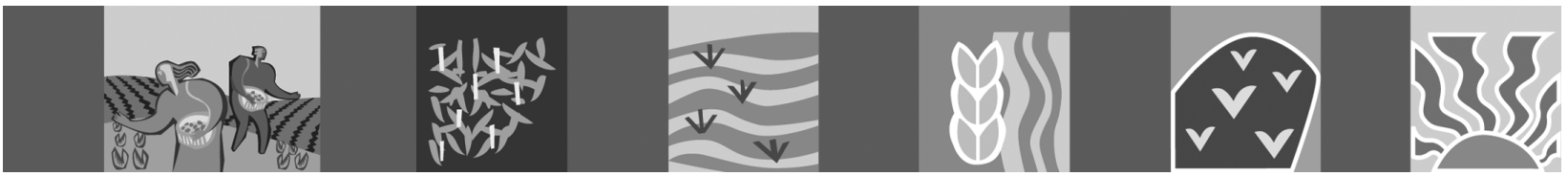
Astonishingly, altruistic institutions, too, lust for land. The Nepal case study presents how foundations, schools, and religious organizations are also involved in highly dubitable land deals,



Victims of eviction from the Chak community
Photo by ALRD

giving the impression that these are simply too good to pass up. Some of these organizations are cover-ups of political parties, others are engaged in land plotting, reselling lands intended for beneficent purposes (like building churches and schools) to commercial interest groups at much higher prices.

That the guiding hand of these investments is that of governments makes the scenario dimmer for those who find themselves fighting for every grain of produce or fistful of sand, as in the case of the seaweed farmers in Caluya, Antique, Philippines. Some 300 of them have been evicted by local authorities because the stretch of white beach they had had since World War II happens to be – to their surprise – owned by someone



they have never seen on the island. The investor envisions turning their sea farms, beachfronts, and farmlands into “new Boracays.”

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, the Forest Department leads the pack of land grabbers. Dr Shapan Adnan, who studied the alienation of lands in the CHT, had this to say of the CHT Land Acquisition Regulation of 1958: “A draconian law which empowers the DC [Deputy Commissioners] to use force to acquire the designated lands...” Since 1989, land acquired from indigenous peoples by the Forest Department for commercial purposes has totaled 218,000 acres (88,221.55 ha).¹

Farmers in Gimalas, Batangas, Philippines know very well the government’s hold over which investments get through and which ones do not. Surmising that industrial parks and ports could improve their local economy more than farms can, the local government seemed all too ready to issue certifications of compliance with environmental and other local regulations. Farmers who were cajoled into accepting the offers of money and jobs in exchange for their lands (and livelihoods) soon realized that the money would run out eventually and that promises of jobs came with conditions. The investor has begun hammering away at its much celebrated industrial park, leaving the farmers with far less than the touted benefits.

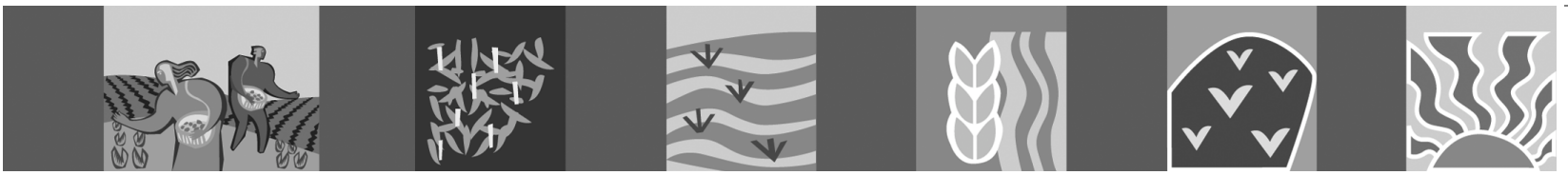
Case study writers of Indonesia’s economic initiatives are led to the conclusion that the MP3EI, the country’s strategy for bringing in more investors, has laid the groundwork for the proliferation of land grabbing for mining and plantations in Central Sulawesi. The result has been the rise of many agrarian reform conflicts. More than half of the 31 land-related conflicts in

Sulawesi in 2013 happened in Central Sulawesi. The indigenous tribes of the Mamanwas of Jabonga in Agusan del Norte and the Subanens of Misamis Occidental, both in the Philippines, are asserting their ancestral land rights against mining and biofuel production respectively. From their experience, the importance of having a National Land Use Code is glaringly evident, as a means of protecting biodiversity areas and establishing clear provisions in the disposition of lands and resources. Supposedly, an official of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples imparted this wisdom: “Don’t remain as Subanens so you can succeed and prosper in life.” A completely unacceptable attitude coming from the very authority installed to protect IP customs, traditions, and institutions.

Transparency in land acquisition transactions is another major issue. Villagers in Koh Kong Province, Cambodia decry the lack of information on a \$3 billion investment for an international trade and tourism center. Not only were the affected communities overlooked in consultations and action plans for relocation, they were also disregarded in decision-making and conflict-resolution measures. So far about 1,143 families have been evicted, 1,500 houses flattened, and two schools and three Buddhism pagodas moved away from the communities.

Peoples’ organizations also protest the lack of details surrounding a steel plant project of a South Korean corporation in iron ore-rich Odisha, eastern India. “Anti-people” is how they describe the kind of development being championed by the government, given the State’s poor track record of rehabilitating and properly compensating displaced communities.

¹ An acre is 0.40 ha.



There are, of course, outliers. One of them is SACARBEMCO in Compostela Valley, Philippines. This cooperative of agrarian reform beneficiaries found a way to make agribusiness venture agreements work for its members. With the help of NGOs, they were able to negotiate a fairer contract with a company for the selling and buying of their rubber. Out of this partnership, the cooperative recovered its previous losses and was able to diversify its services to its members. Certainly, there are many other success stories like theirs just waiting to be written and shared.

These hard times call for divergent thinking. Our farming and fishing communities tell us that they are under immense pressure – from the government, from the burden of debt, from a globalized society. By documenting their experiences, we see the need to come up with many solutions as opposed to just one. By sharing these accounts with each other, we are able to see spaces for collaboration. What is not open for negotiation is that whatever outcomes we prescribe should be evaluated against a horizon of values and be judged by their moral worth. ■