

Access to Land and Global Development

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The past several years have witnessed a strange confluence of events. On the one hand, recent spikes in world prices for food and fuel commodities have led to a global rise in large-scale land deals (popularly referred to as land grabs). Primarily occurring in Latin America, Africa and Asia, these land deals are initiated by private and public actors hoping to secure off shore production sites for agricultural goods and alternative energy crops. Although the extent of the land deals are not known (see the recently released report by the World Bank, *Rising Global Interest in Farmland*), the potential transfer of land from poor or asset-insecure households in ecologically sensitive areas to corporate farmers or brokers has generated widespread protest. Land deals have implications for global poverty, migration, the environment and Development. At the same time, and counter to the trend in land deals, the issue of agrarian reform -- or the progressive distribution of land ownership -- has become an increasingly visible and important political issue in countries around the world. New grassroots movements in countries from Brazil to the Philippines have organized unemployed rural workers and landless farmers to occupy unproductive properties and pressure the government for their expropriation. Activists have come together with academics and politicians to argue that extreme inequality in land ownership is constitutive of broader social and economic problems, such as uneven development, poverty, malnutrition, and violence.

It is thus extremely important at this moment to understand the nature of these two seemingly opposing trends in access to land, production and distribution - as well as the ways in which they overlap or intersect. Clearly, there are many aspects to this issue of land access, but in this lunch, we propose to focus on one central question: ***what role does access to land play in shaping responses to contemporary challenges such as: global food vulnerabilities, particularly hunger; climate change and the search for sustainable energy alternatives; ecological degradation; global economic stagnation; and political instability, social injustice and mal-distributions of various sorts.*** In other words, how and why does ownership matter? Why did corporations shed their landholdings in the 1960s only to have public actors buy them back up now? How have nation-states around the world deployed the tools of eminent domain and how are justifications for this changing? How are the meanings associated with land use produced and how do they shape struggles over access? How do these struggles, in turn, shape everything from household livelihood decisions to national development trajectories?

We hope that this initial meeting will bring together a wide group of scholars to brainstorm ways of addressing these questions and possibly developing one (or all) of the following initiatives: creating a research working group to further explore these issues; planning a university-level conference or workshop to discuss ongoing research in these areas; or initiating a research project in the local area (the state of New York) in which a group of people could study a combination of the relevant issues, using historical and geographic comparisons to understand how access to land and land rights is shaping discussions over alternative energy sources, food production, economic diversification, labor migration, etc. Regardless of which initiative (if any) is developed, we would like to talk across regional comparisons, scale (from the localized to the global), themes, and areas of expertise.

There are few development issues as important today or as contentious - as the issue of access to land. Although the literature on globalization and economic change once presaged a flat or footloose world freed from its physical surroundings, contemporary development turns in fundamental ways on the incorporation, transformation and distribution of land. Because of the multi-faceted character of land use, access is a technical, political, social, cultural and economic process mediated by individuals, households, communities, nation-states, corporations and multi-lateral bodies. How people access land (often called simply land tenure arrangements but involving a complex set of social, political and economic relationships), influences and is influenced by everything from global development trajectories to localized community ties. This lunch seeks to bring together scholars from the Cornell community to discuss these issues and pool intellectual resources in crafting an academic response.