



Statement submitted by VIVAT International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council to the 8th Session of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals

Conflict prevention, post-conflict peace building and promotion of durable peace, rule of law and governance, February 6th, 2014, United Nations

Continued Land Grabbing May Lead to Global Conflict

In discussing which should be the priorities, pillars, goals and indicators of the Post-2015 global agenda, we are looking at ways to create enabling conditions for sustainable development. We are convinced that this important discussion begs a few key questions. “Sustainable development” where and for whom? We all agree that conflict prevention, promoting durable peace, and an overarching framework rooted in the Rule of Law and Governance are paramount to its realization. We also agree that it should be “sustainable” for all people on Earth. But are we dreaming or setting ourselves up for disappointment?

Research has shown that there are currently over 200 local conflicts taking place in Central and South America alone that have resulted from mining activities. Conflicts are happening in Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, and Ecuador just to name a few. Blood is being poured out day after day because of the “rush for land” while land grabbing continues to take place on all continents, though at least 60% is believed to occur in Africa, where investment in land is hardly ever conflict-neutral. In the Horn of Africa there is potential for localized political grievances linked to land issues to turn into wider regional conflicts.ⁱ

Land grabbing refers to land acquisitions by transnational corporations, business enterprises, private investors, and foreign governments through sale or lease contracts – some of which are for up to 99 years - which are highly detrimental to the interests of local communities. Highly productive land and access to water are acquired by investors usually for the production of food crops most of which are for export (including genetically modified organisms –GMOs- which continue to be at the centre of fierce international debate owing to health and environmental concerns), biofuels, and extraction of raw minerals. The deals are frequently reached without including at all in the process of consultations and negotiations the local communities living on the land being sold or leased. In many cases host communities, and even host governments, are NOT compensated appropriately for the actual value of the land. In numerous instances the local communities have NOT given their free, prior and informed consent to the purchase or lease of land, on which in many cases they have lived for centuries.

As a result, in many parts of the world land grabbing is already leading to social conflicts, massive internal displacement of people as well as loss of their cultural identity, systematic human rights violations, destruction of livelihoods, poverty, permanent environmental damage, pollution and loss of biodiversity. Indigenous people's leaders, community leaders and human rights defenders who speak out on behalf of their communities affected by land grabs are frequently persecuted, are victims of torture, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances and assassinations.

In December, faced with this tragedy, the Guaranis-kayowás indigenous community (Brazil) initiated an actual simulation of a "funeral", a death ritual for their land and identity. Their claim is not ownership but membership: "*Land serves to know who we are,*" they stated pointing to the fact that based on their beliefs land is not a possession, should not be exchanged for money, and is not a good on which to speculate.ⁱⁱ Indigenous people are not only losing their cultural identity but their lives in an effort to defend their land and that of their ancestors. This happened to Shuar Fredi Ramiro Taish Tiwiran who was killed by the army in Ecuador, just to name one exampleⁱⁱⁱ.

Environmentalists working in the Amazon rainforest in Peru published a document to express their deep concern as palm oil companies and international speculators continue to buy vast rainforest areas from the government even though clearing primary forest is illegal. Around 10,000 hectares of rainforest have already been destroyed illicitly to make room for palm oil monocultures.^{iv}

Land grabs also lead to "water grabs". Foreign investors that are after land in Africa, enter into direct competition with local communities for access to water. This has repeatedly ended in bloody conflicts in countries which are already "thirsty", suffering from droughts, and where their population already lacked sufficient access to drinking water and water for their livelihood activities.

Cross border migration and other phenomena can be increasingly traced back to natural resource management issues and land dispossession. In spite of all this, to date land grabbing has barely made it onto the global agenda and is hardly recognized in international fora for what it is. This fast expanding phenomenon poses a threat to the people on Earth today and to those yet to be born. It has devastating effects on the human, economic and social development of any community, devastating impacts on its livelihood opportunities, human rights, and undermines the cultural identity of people and communities, including indigenous people and minorities. Often it is also environmentally destructive.

Land grabbing must be urgently addressed. We are here to call out to all of you asking that preventing and counteracting land grabbing be recognized as urgent priorities on the global sustainable development agenda beyond 2015.

We believe that the Rule of Law in its application must create a viable environment for the sustainable use of natural resources, mindful of the rights of existing communities and future generations, who should also be able to enjoy land, access to water and biodiversity. Clear **rules** must be in place **for land governance and natural resource exploitation**. They **should take into account traditional and customary forms of land governance and use, cultural identity and spiritual values of communities**, including

indigenous people. Local communities must know and be able to participate in governance decisions affecting their lives, hence their **free, prior and informed consent must be an essential pre-requisite of all land deals**. Local communities must be protected from arbitrary actions by governments and corporations. Where their human rights are violated by the public or private sector, local communities and civil society must be able to access judicial mechanisms to seek accountability and redress. **State and non-state grievance mechanisms and the provision of effective remedies must be made available.**

Pope John Paul II^v in addressing the 24th General Assembly of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) emphasized that “*The findings of science must be put to use in order to ensure a high productivity of land in such a way that the local population can secure food and sustenance without destroying nature*”. As an organization whose primary concern is peace and social justice, whose members work in many countries and, in working with local communities, witness land grabs first hand, **we want to speak out today and warn that land grabbing paves the way for conflict**. How, for the sake of the financial benefit of a few, can we tolerate not only widespread and growing land-grabbing but also the resulting destruction of human communities and eruption of conflicts all over the world? **Stop land grabs!**

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NOTES

ⁱ Cfr. Briefing paper: *Peace, Brand and Land. Agricultural Investments in Ethiopia and the Sudans*; edited by Chatham House, Independent thinking on international affairs, January 2013: “Investment in land is not conflict-neutral, and given the history of violent conflict and mutual destabilization in the Horn of Africa there is potential for localized political grievances to turn into wider regional conflict.”
<http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/181519>

ⁱⁱ Priscila Baima, Guaranis-kayowás iniciam ritual de morte por terra e identidade, Adital: “O que eles reivindicam não é a propriedade, é o pertencimento. A terra não é posse, não se troca por dinheiro, não serve para especular. Serve para você saber quem você é.” <http://site.adital.com.br/site/noticia.php?lang=PT&cod=79149>

ⁱⁱⁱ Shuar Fredi Ramiro Taish Tiwiran was killed on November 2013 the 7th, by the Ecuadorian army and Agencia de Regulación y Control Minero (ARCOM) while holding an assembly, according to the Shuar [Community](http://www.conflictosmineros.net/contenidos/10-colombia/15766-la-nacionalidad-shuar-sus-organizaciones-y-centros-ante-la-muerte-del-hermano-fredi-ramiro-taish-tiwiran):
<http://www.conflictosmineros.net/contenidos/10-colombia/15766-la-nacionalidad-shuar-sus-organizaciones-y-centros-ante-la-muerte-del-hermano-fredi-ramiro-taish-tiwiran>

^{iv} Stop the palm oil industry’s assault on the Amazon, by Raining Forest Rescue: “The companies had purchased 60,000 hectares of primary rainforest from the government in Loreto alone. They also requested logging concessions for more than 100,000 hectares in the Loreto and Ucayali regions. 10,000 hectares have already been cleared without authorization, allegedly without the knowledge of the responsible politicians”.
<https://www.rainforest-rescue.org/mailalert/933/stop-the-palm-oil-industry-s-assault-on-the-amazon>.

^v http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1987/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19871113_xxiv-sessione-fao_en.html (Rome, November the 13th 1987)