

## Conference Report: Land Grabbing, Conflict, and Agrarian-Environmental Transformations: Perspectives From East and Southeast Asia, 5-6 June 2015, Chiang Mai University

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It was an extraordinarily emotional moment for an academic conference when the Cambodian human rights activist Hong Chinda<sup>1</sup> informed the audience that her family had just been evicted from their land once again by the Cambodian authorities. This time, the incident happened during her absence, while she was attending the conference on “Land Grabbing, Conflict and Agrarian-Environmental Transformations: Perspectives From East and Southeast Asia”<sup>2</sup> and only shortly before she addressed the 240 international participants of the conference in her speech. Hong Chinda’s case is just one of the countless examples of conflict over land in the Southeast Asian region. Her testimony is a reminder of the importance of this conference, which was a follow-up to the related international academic conferences organized by the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI) at University of Sussex (UK) in 2011 and at Cornell University (USA) in 2012. Established in 2010, the LDPI is a network of academic research institutions and individuals that “aims to provide in-depth and systematic enquiry into the global land grab in order to have deeper, meaningful and productive debates around causes and implications” (LDPI, n.d.).

Academic interest in what is now globally known as *land grab* followed the sudden increase in large-scale, cross border land acquisitions in the Global South that began around 2007 (Hall, 2013, p. 95). A briefing of the international non-governmental organization GRAIN, titled “SEIZED! The 2008 Land Grab for

1 Hong Chinda is a human rights activist from Sihanoukville in Cambodia. She is a member of the Community Peace Building Network (CPN) and a founding member of the Action Research Team (ART) which is an informal community based network of land, forest, and fishery rights activists from seven provinces in Cambodia. (“Land Grabbing”, 2015).

2 The conference was organized by a broad range of organizations and institutions: BRICS Initiatives for Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS), Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI), Mosaic Research Project, Transnational Institute (TNI), Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), Focus on the Global South, The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) Chiang Mai University in cooperation with Demeter (Droits et Egalite pour une Meilleure Economie de la Terre), Geneva Graduate Institute, University of Amsterdam WOTRO/AISSR Project on Land Investments (Indonesia/Philippines), Université de Montréal – REINVENTERRA (Asia) Project Mekong Research Group, University of Sydney (AMRC), and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. More information on the conference’s procedures can be found at: [http://www.iss.nl/research/research\\_programmes/political\\_economy\\_of\\_resources\\_environment\\_and\\_population\\_per/networks/land\\_deal\\_politics\\_ldpi/conferences/land\\_grabbing\\_perspectives\\_from\\_east\\_and\\_southeast\\_asia/](http://www.iss.nl/research/research_programmes/political_economy_of_resources_environment_and_population_per/networks/land_deal_politics_ldpi/conferences/land_grabbing_perspectives_from_east_and_southeast_asia/)

Food and Financial Security”, was reportedly one of the first publications highlighting the issue (GRAIN, 2008). While acknowledging that land grab is nothing new and has been ongoing for centuries (most noticeably since the colonial period), GRAIN claimed that the world food crisis and the bigger financial crisis triggered a new boom in investment in land for both outsourced food production and as a new source for profit (GRAIN, 2008). If the conference in Chiang Mai was to draw one single conclusion, it was that the problems over land are rapidly increasing rather than decreasing, offering a rather gloomy outlook.

The report from GRAIN already identified China as one major global player involved in land grabbing. China had been outsourcing part of its food production well before the global financial crisis in 2008 as part of its general “go abroad strategy” (GRAIN, 2008). Unsurprisingly, China’s influence also featured prominently at the conference in Chiang Mai where numerous case studies related to China’s investment in mainland Southeast Asia were presented<sup>3</sup>. Prominent examples included country cases such as the Lao PDR and Cambodia where Chinese companies control a major share of agricultural land. Fewer studies were presented on Vietnam and Myanmar, with the latter representing one of the latest investment frontiers for foreign capital (again with China as top investor) – a topic that remains narrowly researched. Remarkable was the lack of contributions on Thailand, reflecting the criticism expressed by Thai activist Prue Odochao during his speech at the conference. He criticized that few Thai academics are committed to helping the thousands of rural communities in Thailand still under threat of eviction from land declared as forest area. This situation, according to Odochao, has not improved since the current military government took over power in a coup in May 2014. To remind the audience of the very dangerous life still faced by activists in Thailand, Prue Odochao reported the case of his friend, Pholachi Rakchongcharoen (also known as “Billy”) – a Karen human rights activist who went missing in April 2014 after trying to defend his community against Thai National Park authorities (Amnesty International, 2014).

With over 80 papers presented at the 24 parallel panels, the conference covered a broad range of issues. Even so, the panels managed to stay focused and concise, providing much room for discussion due to strict time management. The topics discussed included, for example, the main actors involved in land grabbing (transnational corporations, states, and local elites), gendered experiences of Southeast Asia’s corporate land rush and the broader context of agrarian transformation in the region. Other panels explored the intersection of land grabs and climate change mitigation. A constant reminder was not to lose sight of other “powers of exclusion” (Hall, Hirsch, & Li 2011), which often work in more subtle ways than large scale land grabbing. In this context the Economic Land Concessions in Cambodia was a frequently quoted case. While there was broad agreement on the increasing number of land grabbing cases and the global forces at play, several academics, such as Henry Bernstein, urged not to forget the processes of class formation as well as the internal differentiations and gender dynamics related to land issues. A case in point was a paper by Kevin Woods who studied the involvement of Thai based agribusiness giant CP Group in maize contract farming in Myanmar’s Shan State. The paper argued that “corporatization and regional-/globalisation of the chicken feed market has radically

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3 Moreover, conference participants also addressed China’s role in Africa and Southern America.

transformed agrarian relations and structures of debt and dispossession in rural, up-land Shan State” (Woods, 2015, abstract), without the need for direct land grabbing.

A major discussion at the conference revolved around the best way to secure land tenure for those who need it the most, and the seeming dichotomy between private land tenure on the one hand versus customary (communal) land tenure on the other. The latter is seen by some advocates as a way to enclose land for the purpose of keeping it out of the control of market forces and to protect its oftentimes indigenous inhabitants. A critic, such as Professor Ben White, however, argued in his closing statement that “both [forms of tenure] result in vast differentiation of rural societies quite different from the egalitarian small-holder communities envisioned by agrarian movements; they do not provide and they often work against democratic control of land”. While he made some proposals for alternative land tenure regimes following the general principal of “land to the tiller”<sup>4</sup>, it is unlikely that this debate will come to a conclusion anytime soon, but will stimulate further discussion in the future. Still, the unconventional mix of academics and activists in this conference provided an exciting, unusual, and profound contribution to the debate. For those academics and practitioners interested in issues on land grabbing and agrarian transformations, it is strongly recommended to visit the conference’s website which provides free access to the complete papers presented.<sup>5</sup>



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4 The principle of “land to the tiller” is based on communal but not customary ownership and democratically allocated individual use rights.

5 See the conference website at: [http://www.iss.nl/research/research\\_programmes/political\\_economy\\_of\\_resources\\_environment\\_and\\_population\\_per/networks/land\\_deal\\_politics\\_ldpi/conferences/](http://www.iss.nl/research/research_programmes/political_economy_of_resources_environment_and_population_per/networks/land_deal_politics_ldpi/conferences/)

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