

FOOD CRISIS AND THE GLOBAL LAND GRAB

GOVERNMENTS AND CORPORATIONS ARE BUYING UP FARMLAND IN OTHER COUNTRIES TO GROW THEIR OWN FOOD - OR SIMPLY TO MAKE MONEY



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The Land Matrix: Much ado about nothing

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Posted in: ILC

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The International Land Coalition (ILC), in collaboration with prominent international developmental organizations such as the GIZ and CIRAD, recently launched its much-awaited global dataset of land deals, the **Land Matrix**. During last year's conference on Global Land Grabbing in Sussex and with the publication of the '**biggest study on large land deals**', the ILC has been enticing us with snippets of aggregated data on global land deals. It looked promising and I was eagerly awaiting to see its dataset to get a sense of its data quality. Besides, with such a large network of respected collaborators, I was confident that something more elaborate and scientifically rigorous would finally come on offer. It was becoming tiring to see the same deeply flawed figures being relentlessly rehashed (even by fellow academics); such as those, for example, of the **Global Land Project, IFPRI**, and the **World Bank**. The IIED wrote a succinct **brief** highlighting some of the problems with reports such as these.

The moment I read the **Guardian's** announcement of the launch of the dataset, I was struck by a horrendous sense of dismay. In its investor top 10, I immediately noticed the entry of ZTE International in the DRC (2.8 million ha), Wuhan Kaidi in Zambia (2 million ha), and Daewoo in Madagascar (1.6 million ha). How can these be included? These land deals have never come to fruition. This is fairly common knowledge amongst those acquainted with such developments. ZTE only received **100,000 ha**, which it is failing to develop; Wuhan Kaidi received only **79,300 ha**; and Daewoo never received any land - a final leasehold contract for the land was in fact never signed (as the **GIZ** - one of the Land Matrix partners - already reported). The initial Daewoo MoU was also for 1.3 million ha, not 1.6 million ha.

I then turned to the actual dataset and my dismay grew even greater. While we were promised verified data, no thorough verification have appeared to taken place in practice. For example, for Ethiopia, a country I am more familiar with than any other, much of the data appears to be based solely on a report conducted by MELCA on biofuels. However, the data from this report is based entirely on a government dataset that records what areas of land prospective investors are interested in, not acquired. Also, it claims that the Indian government acquired 1 million ha. The links to data sources are broken and the only link that does work takes us to the Global Land Project (!).

The data for the DRC is even more embarrassing. It, for example, contains two entries based on an NGO presentation. The 3 million ha deal referred to be the presenter is the incorrect ZTE deal, which was already included in the dataset, and the entry on 2 million ha by Israel was merely an expression of interest. No such deal ever materialized.

On top of that, across the entire dataset there are numerous duplicate entries - rather sloppy. The 2 Karuturi land deals were, for example, referred to 5 times, the one Ruchi deal 3 times, and the SEKAB deal 5 times.

I pulled out 127 entries of the 466 Africa entries that are either duplicates, unverifiable, or simply incorrect. See **Land Matrix data errors**.

So, from removing these duplicates and inaccurate entries, the 70.2 million ha ILC claims has been acquired is reduced by 20.64 million ha to 49.56 million ha - and this is only from removing some Africa entries. This reduces the total area for sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) from 34.27 million ha to 13.63 million ha. So, based on this, it cannot be claimed that SSA is a major recipient of land investments.

While the ILC claims that all entries were circulated to in-country stakeholders for fact-checking, in reality it appears that this did little to improve data quality. This data is no better than the flawed reports cited above. The sad reality will be that given the extensive public promotion of the dataset, the media and other commentators will once again readily adopt these figures as fact without questioning their integrity.

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Comments

Dear Michael, I appreciate your humble reaction, though remain concerned about how the dataset is presented by the ILC. For example, it claims that "This public component of the database includes only those deals with a reliability ranking of >1, hence all figures on the website only refer to this subset." I won't bother you with another expose, but a large proportion of the data entries do not meet the basic criteria of the corresponding reliability codes (as your heavy reliance on the deeply flawed GLP illustrates). So, in some way you are claiming the data is reliable, while it obviously is not - which I feel constitutes misrepresentation. I would urge to make very specific in that case that the data does not meet any reliability standards or remove those entries that do not meet the criteria of code 1 and above. Moreover, as you claim that this is merely to open up the data to crowdsourcing, I am curious to know why a technical report, based on this flawed data, has been published prior to having opened up the data to public scrutiny? As you have no doubt noticed, the media have already started widely quoting these aggregated figures. I feel, as many colleagues would tend to agree, that there is a huge moral hazard in presenting so publicly such figures without having carried out the necessary fact-checking. Additionally, I have made a large number comments on the accuracy of specific deals within the Land Matrix. Up to now, none of these have been published. Effective crowdsourcing should enable uncensored public input. Lastly, it should not have to be proven that a project doesn't exist - it should be proven that it does. That's like saying fairies exist, until proven otherwise.

Rural Modernity
Posted on 04 May 2012

Thank you for your specific comments on deals in the land matrix. This is exactly the kind of feedback we are hoping to receive with its launch into the public realm. We realise that we have not been clear enough in the website on the specific categories of deals. Our database includes concluded deals, as well as "work in progress" deals in various stages of completeness that may or may not come to fruition. These are included in the overall database as an indication of the level of interest in acquiring land, even where such deals have until now been unsuccessful. We will make sure to verify deals you mention and flag them as "failed" based on conclusive data. We will also modify the public interface to make this a separate and more distinct category. We also appreciate your pointing out several errors. Although we have put much effort into sorting and checking the data that has been collected by a virtual team over the past two years, the lack of transparency and frequent changes in the status of deals mean that errors are inevitable. Our decision to make the existing data public is not a claim that it is all verified, but a strategy to use crowdsourcing to contribute to the continual updating and improvement of data. Your comments are therefore extremely useful, and will be taken into account in the ongoing revision of the data.

Michael Taylor, International Land Coalition Secretariat
Posted on 04 May 2012

Excellent insight into the ILC data. How could the authors allow such oversights to occur? Was there even an internal editing board in place to oversee the final product? And yes, now that the data is out there it will be referenced extensively creating further confusion to the actual extent of land deals. I hope the ILC can offer an explanation?

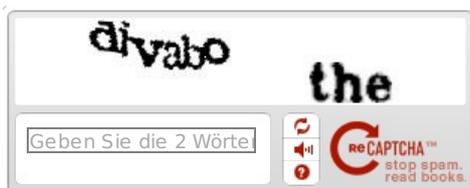
Richard
Posted on 04 May 2012

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