Foreword
to 'Large-Scale Land Acquisitions: Focus on South-East Asia'

Gilles Carbonnier
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1 The crisis that hit the financial, energy, and food sectors with booming prices in the mid-2000s gave rise to a new wave of transnational, large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) in developing countries. Energy and food price hikes accompanied by export restrictions on rice and other staples raised food security concerns worldwide, and in particular among net food importing countries. Both foreign and domestic investors from the private and public sectors have since sought to acquire ownership rights and long-term leases over large portions of land in low-income countries.

2 This spurred renewed research interest in agrarian change and ‘land grabbing’, as reflected in a series of special issues dealing with the topic in major development and agrarian studies journals. On the policy side, social mobilisation against large-scale land acquisitions encouraged intergovernmental organisations and governments to elaborate regulatory frameworks and voluntary guidelines meant to protect the interests of local communities and other stakeholders affected by the new land rush.

3 Notwithstanding a rapidly growing body of knowledge on LSLAs, there remain various gaps, for example between specific insights from case studies performed at the community level and studies that look at land acquisition dynamics at the macro level. There remains much scope to better grasp how land deal plans are effectively implemented on the ground and how they impact the livelihood of community members over the mid to long run, including in terms of human rights.

4 In 2014, the editorial board of *International Development Policy* invited three guest editors for a special issue on the LSLA phenomenon. We asked Christophe Gironde (Senior Lecturer, the Graduate Institute, Geneva), Christophe Golay (Coordinator of the Project on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights) and Peter Messerli (Director of the Centre for Development and Environment, University of Bern) to fill specific gaps in our understanding of LSLAs. I wish to commend the guest editors for bringing major innovative features to this Special Issue, which—in the context of a rapidly growing literature on LSLAs—stands out in four respects.
First, the Issue brings a broad range of disciplines to bear in a coherent framework, thus providing a rich interdisciplinary perspective on LSLAs that includes history, sociology, economics, geography, and law, alongside significant expertise in the fields of agrarian and development studies. Second, this Issue strikes a delicate balance between theoretical, critical reflections and detailed analysis of actual practice and field reality, looking not only at global actors, but also at the role of political and economic elites at the national and local levels. Third, the Issue offers the first major collection of articles on LSLAs with a focus on South-East Asia, a region that has attracted relatively little attention thus far. It looks at actual processes and practices of land acquisitions and agrarian change in Cambodia and Laos in particular. Fourth, this Special Issue stands out by analysing the impact of land acquisition and agrarian change from a human rights perspective: several contributions examine LSLA dynamics through human rights instruments and frameworks.

A series of chapters draw on a collaborative, North-South research project funded by the Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS).¹ This project—entitled ‘Large Scale Land Acquisitions in Southeast Asia: Rural Transformations between Global Agendas and Peoples’ Right to Food’—was carried out between 2012 and 2014 under the leadership of the guest editors. For other papers, we invited authors unrelated to the research project to offer additional historical and global perspectives, and provide the views of public and private investors, as well as of multilateral organisations. The draft papers were first examined and debated during an international workshop held in Geneva in September 2014. This was followed by intense exchanges between the authors and the editors as well as external experts who participated in the workshop. The volume was then submitted to an anonymous peer review process. I wish to thank in particular Ben White and an anonymous reviewer who provided insightful remarks, constructive critique, and numerous suggestions for improvements on the whole Issue.

The volume is organised in three parts. Part 1 sets the scene by providing a historical perspective on contemporary LSLAs, situating this phenomenon within global agro-food dynamics and land policies. Part 2 discusses a rich collection of case studies from South-East Asia. Part 3 examines critical questions on the influence and relevance of human rights instruments. I hope that our readers will enjoy this collection of papers that shed novel light on a phenomenon that lies at the intersection between development and agrarian policies, involving complex social, economic, political and environmental dynamics that affect people’s livelihoods, food security, and social dynamics in many parts of the developing world.

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