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Commercial land grabs threaten global food ecosystem

To end extreme poverty, support smallholder farmers — not multinational agribusinesses

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by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

By 2050, the world will have to feed 9 billion people, which will require 50 percent more agricultural productivity over current levels. Meeting this challenge will be increasingly difficult, given the threats to global food supplies not only from climate change but also from large-scale corporate acquisitions of farmland.

As the demand for sustainable and productive farm practices increases, incentives for export-oriented commodity farming have constricted the supply of arable land. In the last 50 years, the land cultivated for soybeans, African palm oil, rapeseed and sugar cane has [increased fourfold](#), primarily for industrial processing.

Such land grabs for large-scale agriculture are not just locally driven: International financial institutions and free trade agreements encourage taxes and other incentives for foreign direct investment to fund agribusiness, disadvantaging and displacing subsistence farmers, pastoralists and indigenous people who rely on the land to survive. While climate change will disproportionately affect the world's poor, no one will escape unscathed. As [the Oakland Institute, a California-based policy think tank, reported](#) in February, land grabs are not just a concern for developing countries; they may imperil the United States' food supply as well.

Food shortages will also threaten global security. On March 31, the United Nations [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) released a dire assessment. The panel concluded that human-induced ecological changes increase “risks of

violent conflicts in the form of civil war and intergroup violence.” Similarly, in April, World Bank President Jim Yong [Kim noted](#), “Fights over water and food are going to be the most significant direct impacts of climate change in the next five to 10 years.”

The time to promote and protect local control over land and food production is now.

Pro-business benchmarks

As a global institution that aims to eradicate poverty, the World Bank should employ policies that protect the rights of the poor and the marginalized. But the bank has failed to advance that goal by encouraging industrial agriculture and land grabs that erode rather than enhance food security and violate the [right to food](#) enshrined in the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On May 21, a coalition of civil society organizations and community groups [wrote to Kim](#), imploring him to realign the bank’s practices with international standards and to ensure that the bank’s policies respect, protect and fulfill human rights. In the aftermath of the [2008 food price crisis](#) and the [current and predicted impact](#) of climate change on global food supplies, ensuring an adequate global food supply has taken on an increased urgency.

The World Bank advances its neoliberal policies through the [Doing Business](#) project, which purports to measure the “ease of doing business” in countries around the world. The bank’s commercial lending arm, the International Financial Corporation (IFC), facilitates the flow of domestic and foreign capital into developing countries based on those rankings. But the bank uses an [inherently flawed and unscientific](#) methodology, forcing a race to the bottom, where states must compete to create a business-friendly climate that promotes corporate interests instead of protecting the poor and marginalized. Besides, the state’s records on human rights are completely absent from the ranking equation.

Transnational institutions and local governments must invest in sustainable smallholder farms, and support pastoralists and indigenous groups who have proved their good stewardship of the land.

In May 2012, the G-8 countries — France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, Japan, the United States, Canada and Russia — launched a new initiative aimed at lifting 50 million people in Africa out of poverty over the next decade. Human rights groups denounced the [exclusion of stakeholders](#) most directly affected — small-scale, subsistence farmers — from the policy-setting process; they derided the project as [a new form of colonialism](#). The activists contend the initiative favors industrial agriculture and encourages large-scale commercial investment instead of prioritizing the needs of poor rural populations. The G-8 project mandated that the World Bank adapt its Doing Business rankings to the agricultural sector, creating [Benchmarking the Business of Agriculture](#) (BBA). However, [BBA suffers the same](#) methodological and policy failings as the ranking on which it's modeled.

The bank claims to have [learned from past projects](#) that engendered egregious human rights abuses. But its recent practices belie this claim. For example, in the Bajo Aguán region of Honduras, the IFC provided funding to the Dinant Corp., one of the country's largest agribusinesses, despite complaints of land grabbing for African palm oil production and repression against land rights activists in the region. A [Human Rights Watch report](#) released in February noted the lack of investigations into the killings of land rights activists since 2009. Last month, more than 100 members of the U.S. House of Representatives wrote to [Secretary of State John Kerry](#) expressing alarm at complete impunity for the violence in the Bajo Aguán and other human rights abuses in Honduras. Dinant claims its critics [misconstrued](#) the facts and that its own security forces have been under siege. But even the IFC's internal watchdog, the compliance adviser ombudsman, [concluded that the bank failed](#) to identify risks in the area and safeguard the rights of local farmers.

Without appropriate safeguards, institutional support for agribusiness harms local food self-sufficiency. A survey by the global charity Oxfam released in April found that private agricultural investment can negatively affect food security by displacing local communities, eliminating their access to land for subsistence farming, exposing locals to harmful agrochemicals, degrading the environment and bypassing local protections for land tenure. Yet, even when the investments were aimed at small-scale farms, agribusiness models of monoculture cultivation were not readily transferrable to sustainable local food production. In addition, studies show that locally controlled farms outperform industrial agribusiness in a number of benchmarks, including productivity, environmental stewardship and promoting social cohesion.

Ensuring food security for the world's poor requires a multipronged and multilateral approach. Industrial agriculture could be one tool in the arsenal to combat hunger. But existing policies must be carefully calibrated to increase food security and land tenure for the world's poor, not enrich agribusinesses. Transnational institutions and local governments must invest in sustainable smallholder farms, and support pastoralists and indigenous groups who have proved their good stewardship of the land. In its prophesied mission to end extreme poverty within a generation, the World Bank must disavow policies that accelerate land grabs, food insecurity and conflict, and explicitly integrate human rights standards into its mission.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.