



What will the farming systems of the future look like?

Episode 2: Land for sale

TRANSCRIPT

Jérémy Bourgoin (00:02)

The value we put on land is more than just its financial, speculative or productive value. Unless we understand the fundamentally spiritual, philosophical and ethical aspects of land, we can't begin to understand why people refer to land grabbing or why land investment and transactions are so controversial; land supports virtually all, if not all of our activities on Earth.

Intro (00:12)

The farming systems of the future won't look like those of today. What we need to ask ourselves is what sorts of farming systems we want, for us and for our children. *Nourrir le vivant* (Feeding the living world), a CIRAD podcast. Season 5, episode 2: Land for sale.

Jérémy Bourgoin (00:49)

Nearly 100 000 hectares, just over 7% of the total area, are under pressure from these concessions. The important thing is to show that degradation and deforestation are continuing apace, and particularly concern certain areas, notably indigenous cemeteries, which have now been lost.

Commentary (01:13)

Jérémy Bourgoin is a geographer with CIRAD. He is working with the International Land Coalition, an organization set up to defend people's access to land. The figures he quotes are the areas of forest that have been degraded since the arrival of investors in the zone occupied by the Saamakas, in Surinam. The Saamakas are an indigenous people of African descent, representing 20% of the country's population. Most of them live in tropical forests. Despite a 2007 decision by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to protect these people's lands, the Surinam government is continuing to grant parts of those lands to foreign investors. The ILC estimates that since 2007, 32% of the Saamakas' lands have been transferred, in the form of mining or forestry concessions. As

things stand, just 7% of the total area has actually been degraded as a result of these sales, but the figure is set to rise rapidly in the coming years. Within the ILC, Jérémy is involved in the work of the Land Matrix, an observatory of large-scale land acquisitions. International land transactions are nothing new. However, they often come under fire for their lack of transparency or the unfair way in which they treat local people, who are rarely consulted before sales go through.

Jérémy Bourgoin (02:32)

Land has always been strategically important in terms of control, or of supplies. Colonial powers tended to make land available to grow crops and export goods between colonies or to Europe. What we have seen since the early 2000s is renewed interest in land from various mainly agroindustrial sectors, but also governments or sovereign funds that have seen the point of securing access to their own food security or sovereignty by investing, or of encouraging investment on the part of state firms in other countries to secure supplies. There has very clearly been substantial Chinese investment in Southeast Asia, for instance. In China, some areas have reached saturation point in terms of agricultural production, and are therefore looking to produce in neighbouring countries, by buying up land. This is also the case in Saudi Arabia, which has little if any arable land so is keen to obtain food supplies from other countries, notably in Africa. This renewed interest in land is because it is now seen as an investment sector for countries that want to boost their food sovereignty and security, and it is also attracting interest from the financial sector in general.

Commentary (04:00)

Between 2000 and 2020, the Land Matrix recorded 1865 international land transactions. In terms of land area, that meant 33 million hectares, or the equivalent of a country like Italy or the Philippines. At the time, most of those land deals were agricultural investments, prompted by the 2007 energy crisis and galloping food prices. In some instances, this race for agricultural land has had significant consequences for local people.

Jérémy Bourgoin (04:30)

Land grabbing is linked to a feeling of disempowerment, maybe as regards access to land or land use, but in some cases also various forms of violence. This is because in many cases, land is indeed grabbed, land that local people were already using for agricultural activities, particularly family farming. It also sometimes concerns common land, which has a range of uses, some of them cultural and others seasonal. This is often the case with herders in the Sahel, who move from place to place depending on the season and in response to climate change. Pastoralism allows for a degree of adaptation depending on where resources are available, and investments, particularly land investments that create enclaves, can result not just in spatial exclusion but in social exclusion, which may trigger various forms of conflict.

Commentary (05:33)

Fifteen years after agricultural land deals peaked, we are seeing new developments in terms of international transactions. Ward Anseeuw worked at the ILC and the Land Matrix, and is now lead of the FAO Land Tenure Team, working on land governance, inter-State talks and the current changes in international land deals. He pinpoints three emerging new trends:

Ward Anseeuw (05:58)

The first is a shift from land purchases for farming to purchases for renewable energy, which is known

as green grabbing. This means buying land either to install solar panels, or for mining operations linked to renewable energy. In practice, this corresponds to a much greater number of deals, but for smaller areas. As a result, we're still finding it difficult to document the extent, at least in terms of quantity, of this green grabbing, particularly since a lot of these concessions and exploratory mining sites already existed. For instance, in Chile, during the first rush in 2008-2009, when we started documenting these trends, we discovered that the entire country was already a mining concession, sub-divided into smaller concessions.

Commentary (07:06)

In the case of Chile, the equivalent of 120% of the country's surface area has already been allocated in the form of mining exploration contracts. In practice, this means that several firms may be authorized to look for minerals in the same area. If we add all the areas granted together, the total therefore sometimes exceeds the total area of the country. In some extreme cases, if minerals have been found, entire towns have been displaced, like in South Africa.

Jérémy Bourgoin (07:38)

There's a lot of talk about the energy transition in some countries, particularly in the West, but what we don't always think about is how that affects other countries and areas worldwide. The Land Matrix's work shows that the mining operations needed for this transition to more solar panels, more batteries, more electric vehicles, involve finding minerals that are either on land occupied by indigenous communities that have little, if any security in terms of land tenure and therefore no way of fighting this sort of investment, or in areas that will no longer only be suffering from land insecurity but will be tipped into food insecurity. This is how arable areas are converted into mining enclaves, with all the different sorts of pollution that implies.

Commentary (08:35)

In the European Union alone, the International Energy Agency estimates that demand for minerals for the energy transition will be multiplied by between 1.5 and 7 between now and 2030. This spike in demand will mean opening new mines all over the world. The mining sector is therefore outstripping the agricultural sector in terms of international land investments. At the same time, the very type of players behind these transactions is changing, with agricultural players handing over to financial ones. For Ward Anseeuw, this second trend has seen the arrival of financial players on the international land market, often investment funds concentrated in tax havens. This increasing emphasis on finance goes hand-in-hand with a lack of transparency in these new land deals.

Ward Anseeuw (09:23)

The first rush involved land purchases, in other words a change in ownership and the acquisition of that ownership. The current switch to financial agents means land deals are taking the form of control over land rather than actual ownership. The snag is that as a result, the land market is becoming increasingly invisible.

Commentary (09:52)

In this context of increasingly opaque land transactions, research has an important part to play in documenting and analysing trends. Land ownership data are no longer enough to monitor changes and observatories like the Land Matrix need to open up to new types of financial information. At the same time, satellite imaging has to adapt to smaller purchases in terms of area, which are more

difficult to detect. Alongside these relatively conventional methods, research is now finding new ways of obtaining data on land tenure changes, such as participatory mapping. This involves listening to the local communities directly impacted by transactions. In return, research is improving access to data aggregated on an international level.

Ward Anseeuw (10:41)

Research is not unbiased, and you can use it to demonstrate anything you like. Participatory research showcases a certain vision of these dynamics, which other players doing their own research will no doubt contradict. This gives rise to an opposition of research methods, of ways of doing research, and what happens then? Someone will say “my data are right” while someone else says “no, mine are”. So yes to participatory research, to give concrete grassroots situations a voice and a face, but we need to go further, beyond participatory research, to engaged research, I’d say, or policy-based research.

Commentary (11:29)

In the case of the Saamakas in Surinam, one of the ILC’s aims was to demonstrate that land observatories like the Land Matrix are truly operational. In response to a request from the Saamaka community, the ILC provided a report documenting the changes in mining and forestry concessions in Surinam, and the resulting degradation and deforestation.

Jérémy Bourgoin (11:50)

The problem that leading databases and observatories often encounter is use. We’re talking about data that is often aggregated. Not everyone has the analytical capacity to be able to take that information and use it. And the ILC has served to pool different knowledge and information sources in a report intended to advocate for a community to share information obtained from satellite imaging as well as diagnoses and participatory mapping.

Commentary (12:50)

The results obtained by the ILC highlight the contradictions of a country that boasts of being “the greenest in the world”. Surinam, in Latin America, has managed to keep 93% of its forest cover, and is a world leader in terms of forest preservation. However, the ILC data reveal that it has recently been granting concessions here, there and everywhere. Apart from the environmental issues, these land transactions are a direct threat to the Saamakas’ way of living. The report, published in June 2024, has since been submitted to the Surinam Parliament and several ministries. The government has requested a second opinion.

Ward Anseeuw (12:59)

If land is seen as a commodity, it can be transferred under modern conditions that define that commodity and ascribe a value to it. In our societies, that value is often monetary, meaning a possible financialization of that commodity. If land is a commodity linked to a family, to generations of that family, etc, and does not have any other value, selling it is a much more complicated business.



In Surinam, construction of a road through the heart of the forest, to access land or mining concessions © ILC

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Season 5 of *Nourrir le vivant* (Feeding the living world), the CIRAD podcast

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