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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Global Land Grabbing: A Critical Review of Environmental Justice Implications from Case
Studies Across the World

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Social Ecology

by

Ann Jacee Le

Thesis Committee:
Professor Richard Matthews, Chair
Emeritus Professor Dan Stokols
Professor Michael Mendez

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Global Land Grabbing: A Critical Review of Environmental Justice Implications from Case Studies Across the World

by

Ann Jacee Le

Master of Arts in Social Ecology

University of California, Irvine, 2024

Professor Richard Matthew, Chair

In recent decades, large-scale land acquisitions have increased to meet global food, energy, industry, climate protection, conservation, and urban expansion demands. Analyses of their negative impacts have led actors within and outside of academia to label this phenomenon as “land grabbing”. Existing academic literature on land grabs has traditionally used case-study approaches to form in-depth understandings of related impacts and land use change mechanisms. Recent meta-studies have synthesized findings across case-study evidence to draw broader examinations of case-study results. However, few have emphasized assessing the overall impact that land grabs may have on vulnerable populations and their surrounding environments. This article fills the gap in the existing literature by evaluating land grab case studies through the lens of environmental justice. Informed by four commonly emphasized components of environmental justice – distributive, procedural,

corrective, and social justice- 94 selected cases were coded based on acquisition purpose, changes in environment and livelihood conditions, consultation processes, property rights, compensation, and stakeholder composition. Findings from this meta-synthesis study reveal how land grabbing processes are contributing to injustices across all four evaluative parameters of environmental justice. This paper concludes with a call for more structured research designs which incorporate environmental justice as an evaluative parameter.

INTRODUCTION

Global spatial change is being driven in part by large-scale land investments undertaken to satisfy food, energy, and industrial production demands as well as environmental protection and urbanization agendas (Holmes, 2014; Rulli et al., 2012; Yang and He, 2021). Such alterations in land use patterns have resulted in changes to local livelihoods and landscapes across the globe. Since 2008, these large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs), commonly referred to as 'global land grabbing', have been associated with human displacement, environmental harm, and violent conflicts across local and global scales (Dell'Angelo et al., 2016). Consequently, the study of land grabs and their associated impacts has been accessed through various methodological approaches. At a global level, the Land Matrix (2016) provides one of the most comprehensive, large-scale databases for understanding transnational patterns of land grab implications.

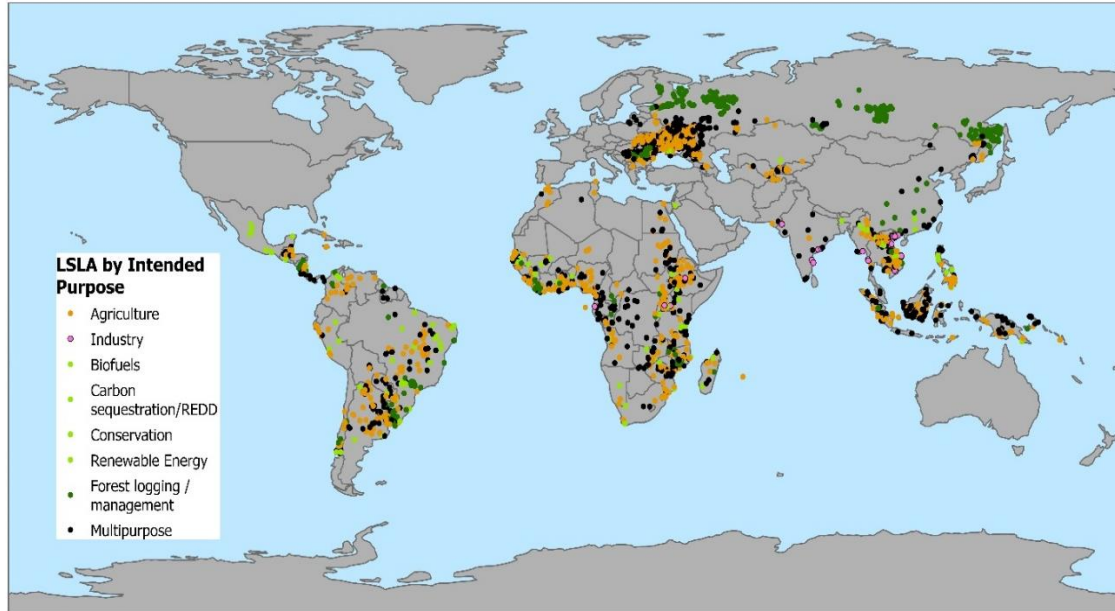


Figure 1: There is significant concern that Large Scale Land Acquisitions (LSLAs) are becoming increasingly common around the world. Classified as any transfer of rights to use, control, or ownership of land through sale, lease, or concession of 200 hectares and above, limited data availability on LSLAs presents a major obstacle to evaluating their overall impacts. This map depicts the location of 3,537 large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs), as documented by the Land Matrix, an independent global land monitoring initiative established in 2009 to address the lack of robust data on LSLAs. Each dot represents the location points of land deals occurring since the year 2000. Documented cases of LSLAs are intended for a wide variety of purposes ranging from agricultural production, timber extraction, and renewable energy production, to carbon trading, industry, conservation, and tourism. (Source: Land Matrix 2022).

Map by: Ann J. Le, based on Esri & Land Matrix | Sources: Esri; LandMatrix, International Land Commission (ILC), Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (CIRAD), Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ); UNEP-WCMC, IUCN; Esri: Land Matrix 2022).

To complement global assessments, a number of publications have implemented case-study approaches to understand highly contextualized dimensions associated with specific actors, subjects, and land-use patterns involved within local scales (Holmes, 2014; Zambakari, 2017). A subset of this literature further employs environmental justice as an analytical angle to understanding socio-ecological drivers of inequities associated with land grabs (Busscher, 2019; Gonzalez, 2019). While this body of literature provides in-depth

valuations of land grab impacts, it remains limited by local specificity and geographical bias (Yang and He, 2021).

To merge the advantages of both methodological approaches, implementation of meta-study methods has become increasingly common within existing scholarly literature on land grabbing. Prior meta-studies on land grabs have focused on synthesizing available case studies to build a comprehensive understanding of land grabs across local and global scales (Yang and He, 2021; Dell'Angelo et al., 2016; Hong and Sullivan, 2013). This study seeks to fill the gap within existing literature by using a meta-study approach to evaluate further the implications of land grabs through the lens of environmental justice. Using a systematic literature selection process, I selected 98 empirically driven peer-reviewed case studies from 94 articles out of 267 peer-reviewed articles. An environmental justice theoretical perspective was used to theory-code selected cases using seven key variables that characterize the dynamics of land grab implications. The underpinning aim of this project, therefore, is to use a meta-analytical approach to understand: 1) what forms of environmental injustices are associated with LSLA occurrences and 2) how these injustices contribute to socio-ecological changes occurring in affected areas.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Land Grabs, its history, and etymology

Following the food and energy price crisis in 2007-2008, heightened concerns over food, biofuel, and industrial manufacturing demands led to a dramatic increase in large-scale investments in land for commercial crop production (Rulli, 2012; Yang and He, 2021). More recently, such investments are also occurring to meet biodiversity conservation (Masum, 2016), climate mitigation (Parola, 2020), urbanization (Siciliano, 2014), and mineral extraction agendas (Hausermann, 2018). Globally, land-related deals are predicted to have involved roughly between 45 million and 227 million hectares (Yang and He, 2021), with a majority of land deals intended for agricultural investments (Sandig, 2021). The rise of large-scale investment land projects has attracted significant academic attention in recent years. In addition to their scale and quantity, critics are drawing increasing attention to LSLAs that predominantly involve: 1) foreign investors or those belonging to the domestic elite, 2) violation of human rights for existing land users, and 3) ecological destruction of purchased land (Deininger et al., 2011; Yang and He, 2021; Busscher et al., 2020). Such criticisms have led academic, civil society, and media actors alike to label some LSLAs as 'land grabs', a term widely used to elicit a connection to historical colonial and imperialist dynamics.

While there is no single globally accepted definition for the term 'land grab', available definitions build on existing criticisms to formalize parameters for evaluating LSLAs. For example, according to the 2011 International Land Coalition, land grabbing refers to LSLAs that involve "acquisitions that are in violation of human rights, without

prior consent of the preexisting land users, and with no consideration of social and environmental impacts”. It has also been defined as “taking possession and/or controlling a scale of land which is disproportionate in size in comparison with average land holdings in the region” (Offei 2014, p 10). Other definitions have sought to parameterize land grabs as any land transaction involving more than 1000 hectares of land (Cotula et al. 2009), or any large-scale land deal undertaken by transnational investors or endorsed by foreign governments (GRAIN 2008). More recently, scholars have deviated from defining land grabs along identified patterns and drivers, opting instead to emphasize the diversity of emergent contexts, processes, and forces that are contributing to shifting land control across the globe (Suhardiman, 2014).

The lack of centralized definitions for land grabs has led some scholars to advocate for more neutral terminology to describe the phenomenon. Echoing this call are those who contest dominant narratives describing LSLAs as a threat to the livelihoods and rights of existing land users, seeing it rather as a potential avenue to achieve economic prosperity for the rural poor (Safransky and Wolford, 2011; Deininger, 2011). Advocates for this position have adopted more neutral terminology, such as “land-based investments” (Nanhthavong, 2020), to suggest the capacity of LSLAs to be just processes.¹

A Brief Overview of the field of environmental Justice Studies

An emerging subset of land grab literature has critically analyzed land grabbing through an environmental justice framework to emphasize how negative impacts are

¹ For the purpose of this project, I will be employing the terms ‘land grabs’ and ‘large scale land acquisition’ synonymously.

disproportionately affecting indigenous peoples, the poor, and developing countries (Busscher et al., 2020; Gonzalez, 2016; Bullard, 1990). Drawing on Mohai et al. (2009), environmental injustice represents the structural and systematic paradigms that perpetuate the unequal distribution of hazards, burdens, and risks associated with laws, policies, and practices that impact the environment and vulnerable populations alike. Environmental justice activists and scholars have framed environmental justice through four distinct components: distributive, procedural, corrective, and social justice. As defined by Gonzalez (2016)², distributive environmental justice emphasizes equitable access to environmental amenities and necessities as well as the equitable distribution of the gains and harms of economic activity. Procedural justice is premised on fairness and includes the right to equal community participation within governmental decision making for matters related to the environment. Corrective justice necessitates the enforcement of environmental statutes and regulations by governments as well as compensation for those whose rights were violated. Finally, social justice refers to the interconnected nature of environmental justice to other forms of social and economic justice, wherein environmental justice cannot be achieved without first addressing related systemic and structural inequalities.

Conceived in the late 1980s, a substantial body of environmental justice literature has documented cases of distributive, procedural, corrective, and social injustice across socio-economic and racial/ethnic groups (Mohai, 2009). Beyond affirming the presence of inequity, critical understanding of environmental injustice also considers related protest

² While other theoretical approaches and frames exist, such as Schlosberg's four elements of environmental justice (2000), I choose to focus on Gonzalez's articulation of environmental justice as it articulates a broader framework of EJ that is directly relevant to assessment of land grab dynamics globally.

movements and the subsequent results of resistance efforts (Mendez, 2020). An emerging line of environmental justice studies additionally considers factors which constrain the ability of communities to resist injustice. For example, Busscher et al. (2020) examined how political settings, geographic remoteness, available resources, and restricted information access hindered the ability of communities to protest land grab deals in Argentina.

As articulated by Taylor (2000: 562) in her examination of how environmental justice is framed in the USA, the value of environmental justice as a concept lies in its capacity to link multiple complex problems within one singular frame. This, as Schlosberg (2007) has pointed out, allows environmental justice scholars an organizing frame with which to bring salient issues under an inclusive and plural discourse identifiable to many. As such, while environmental justice scholarship continues to be predominantly anchored in examinations of US based cases, environmental justice is increasingly being applied as a framework to highlight the complex array of socio-political and economic factors involved in perpetuating the unequal distribution of environmental harms between affluent nations (the Global North) and poor and middle-income nations (the Global South) (Mohai, 2009). This scope has subsequently evolved to consider gender and other intersectional dynamics within disadvantaged groups (Parra and Moulaaert, 2016). Emerging insights also increasingly draw attention to linkages between healthy environments and social outcomes, emphasizing their intrinsic relationship across global and local scales (Lakes et al., 2014; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010).

Land Grabbing as Environmental Injustice

Environmental justice remains a valuable framework by which to evaluate the socio-ecological cost of land grabs. Drawing from Gonzalez's 2016 articulation of environmental justice in the context of LSLAs, land grab dynamics are defined by distributive injustice stemming from the unequal distribution of economic benefits to foreign actors and local elites at the cost of historically marginalized groups. They also perpetuate procedural inequities, as deals occur often without consultation with existing land users and consideration towards related environmental and social impacts. Corrective injustice in this context is exhibited by the numerous, and frequently insurmountable, barriers posed to communities seeking to obtain restitution for harms associated with land grabs. Finally, the race for land autonomy is situated within broader social justice conflicts defined in large part by Global North-South relations. This encompasses historical and contemporary policies that have supported the capacity of Northern states to extract resources and suppress resistance efforts across the Global South (Gonzalez, 2016).

Inequities and conflicts associated with land grabs have given rise to a rich body of literature across geographic and temporal scales. Much available literature on land grabs exists from individual case studies and collected volumes published in international peer-reviewed journals from 2012 to 2021 (Yang and He, 2021). In recent years, environmental justice scholars have begun to analyze the implications of land grabs, though such assessments remain uncommon and similarly limited to case studies conducted across local and regional scales. While these case studies provide highly contextualized insights to land dynamics, some scholars have questioned the rigor and coherence of available

research data defined by local specificity and qualitative analyses (Yang and He 2021; Dell'Angelo et al., 2016). At a global level, geographical surveys synthesized by international agencies have provided baseline understandings of the transnational implications of land grabs. For example, the Land Matrix initiative is widely considered as one of the most comprehensive datasets on large scale land deals to date (The Land Matrix, 2016). This approach, however, has spurred concerns over the lack of scientific methodological and conceptual considerations of baseline data sets assembled from media and web information (Yang and He 2021; Dell'Angelo et al., 2016).

To bridge the gap between local case-studies and global patterns of land grab dynamics, application of meta-study approaches is becoming increasingly common. Existing meta-analyses of case-studies on LSLAs occurrences have focused on analyzing patterns of land use changes and their implications through examinations of common grabs (Dell'Angelo et al., 2016) and sustainable land deals (Vandergreten, 2016). Global economic outcomes of LSLAs have also been assessed via meta-analysis methodology by Davis et al (2014). A recent large-N meta-study by Yang and He (2021) have further contributed towards a broader understanding of global land acquisition patterns, as well as common methodological approaches used to evaluate their outcomes.

There currently remains a meta-study gap in LSLA literature under an environmental justice framework. A broader understanding of environmental justice assessments in this context is needed to further examine how LSLAs may be contributing towards socio-ecological changes occurring within affected areas. In light of increasing competition over diverse land-use priorities, environmental justice remains a valuable

analytical lens to interpret the different forms of injustices associated with land grabs. A large meta-study focused on converging environmental justice considerations within the larger body of land grabbing literature could further highlight global patterns of socio-environmental conflicts felt by communities across the globe.

The purpose of this research, therefore, centers on critically synthesizing available published case studies of LSLAs. The underpinning aim of this project is to use a meta-study methodological design to consider the potential value of an environmental justice framework in understanding core academic narratives on 1) the forms of environmental injustices associated with land grab occurrences and 2) how these injustices are contributing to socio-ecological changes occurring across places, livelihoods, and landscapes. This paper will be divided into four sections. The following section outlines the methodology for database creation and literature search, the criteria for literature selection, as well as the analytic framework for this systematic review. Subsequently, the results section, consisting of five subsections, will follow. The first subsection will present an overview of the spatial and temporal distribution of selected case studies of LSLAs. The second through fifth subsections will present findings on commonly identified themes coded along categories outlined within the methods sections. Finally, the fifth section will conclude with a discussion of research gaps as well as potential future research directions.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review following guidelines and strategies adopted by Orbinski et al. (2020) Dell' Angelo et al. (2016), Yang and He (2021), and Mohai et al. (2009) was conducted to compile a database for the purpose of this study.

Database Creation

To identify case studies, a systematic literature review was conducted within the *Web of Science* database research platform. The following keywords : (“land grab*” or “land rush” or “land-based investment” or “large scale land acquisition”) were used to generate a database of articles to fulfill the objective of this thesis. Criteria for case inclusion included studies that have been written in English, published in a peer-reviewed journal article, and constituted research that empirically examined specific cases of LSLAs. Restrictions on search parameters include articles not written in English and did not constitute an empirically driven examination of specific LSLA cases. Table 1 describes the keywords and parameters for the Web of Science search.

Table 1. Search strategy in web of science by keywords		
Topics	Keywords	No. of studies
Large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs)	TITLE: (“land grab*” or “land rush” or “land-based investment” or “large scale land acquisition”) Refined by: DOCUMENT TYPES: (ARTICLE OR PROCEEDINGS PAPER) LANGUAGE: (ENGLISH ONLY)	1,425

The steps of identifying, screening, and determining eligibility of generated studies were carried out in accordance to a predetermined research protocol guided by the

“Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)” statement (Moher et al., 2009; Orbinski et al., 2020). Initial phases of database identification involved exporting search results to Mendeley to identify and eliminate duplicates. Next, exclusion and inclusion criteria were applied, and studies were screened for eligibility by their abstracts. In this step, cases were filtered out if they did not meet the following criteria: 1) the case study examined specific distinct land deals in addition to impacts on local communities, and 2) case study analyses were derived from data generated from fieldwork.

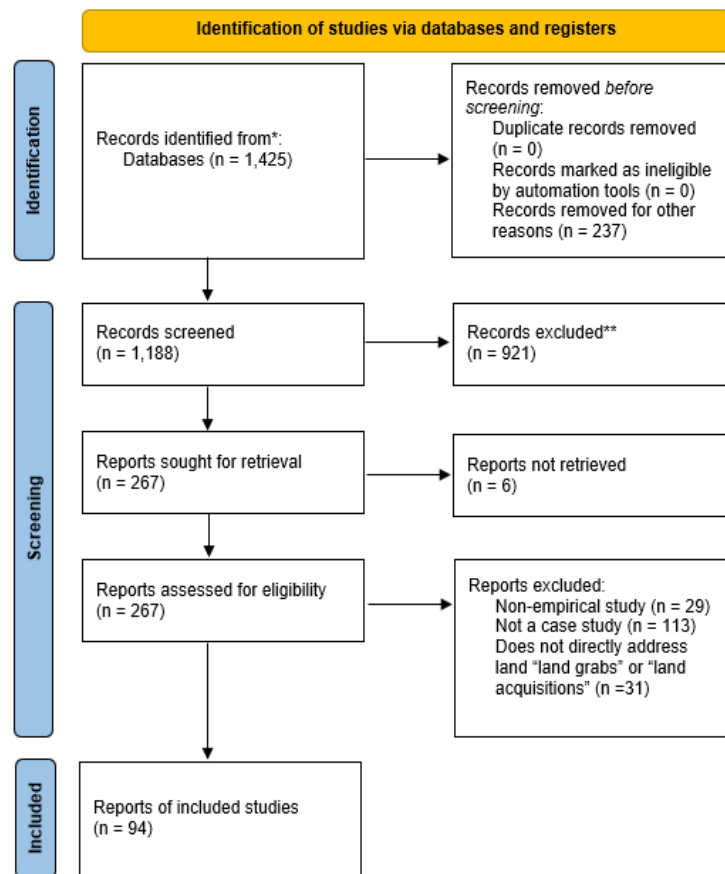


Figure 2. Four steps of the PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2020) for creating a database by systematic literature review.

Data Extraction

Following Dell' Angelo et al. (2016) and Yang and He (2021), systematic case selection and theory-coding were the primary methods of analysis used to guide this study (Magliocca et al., 2015; Dell' Angelo et al., 2016). The coding of materials was conducted over multiple cycles. In initial cycles, descriptive coding of available case studies was conducted via NVivo 11 along with six variables grounded across the distributive, procedural, corrective, and social pillars of the environmental justice framework outlined by Gonzalez et al. (2016). These codes include 1. Related ecological impacts, 2. Livelihood outcomes, 3. Decision-making inclusion, 4. Legal protection and enforcement, 5. Compensation measures, and 6. Stakeholder composition, and 7. Conditions shaping community responses (Figure 3). In subsequent coding rounds, I refined categories related to each variable and used analytical tools such as memos and Air Tables to visualize connections across the six coded themes. Basic information of each selected case study, including specific location, year of initiation, purpose, and size of each selected land deal were also collected when available.

Environmental Justice Component	Definition	Codes
Distributive	Emphasize equitable access to environmental amenities and necessities as well as the equitable distribution of the gains and harms of economic activity.	1. Related ecological impacts 2. Livelihood outcomes
Procedural	Premised on fairness and includes the right to equal community participation within governmental decision making for matters related to land-use changes.	3. Decision Making Inclusion
Corrective	Necessitate the enforcement of environmental statutes and regulations by governments as well as compensation for those whose rights were violated.	4. Legal protection and enforcement 5. Compensation measures
Social	Situated within broader social justice conflicts defined in large part by Global North-South relations. This encompasses historical and contemporary policies that have supported the capacity of Northern states to extract resources and suppress resistance efforts across the Global South.	6. Stakeholder composition 7. Conditions Shaping Community Responses

Figure 3. Descriptive coding plan of case studies. Definitions were drawn from articulations of environmental justice in relation to LSLAs by Gonzalez (2016).

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS FROM META-ANALYSES

Categorical and Temporal Distribution of Case Studies

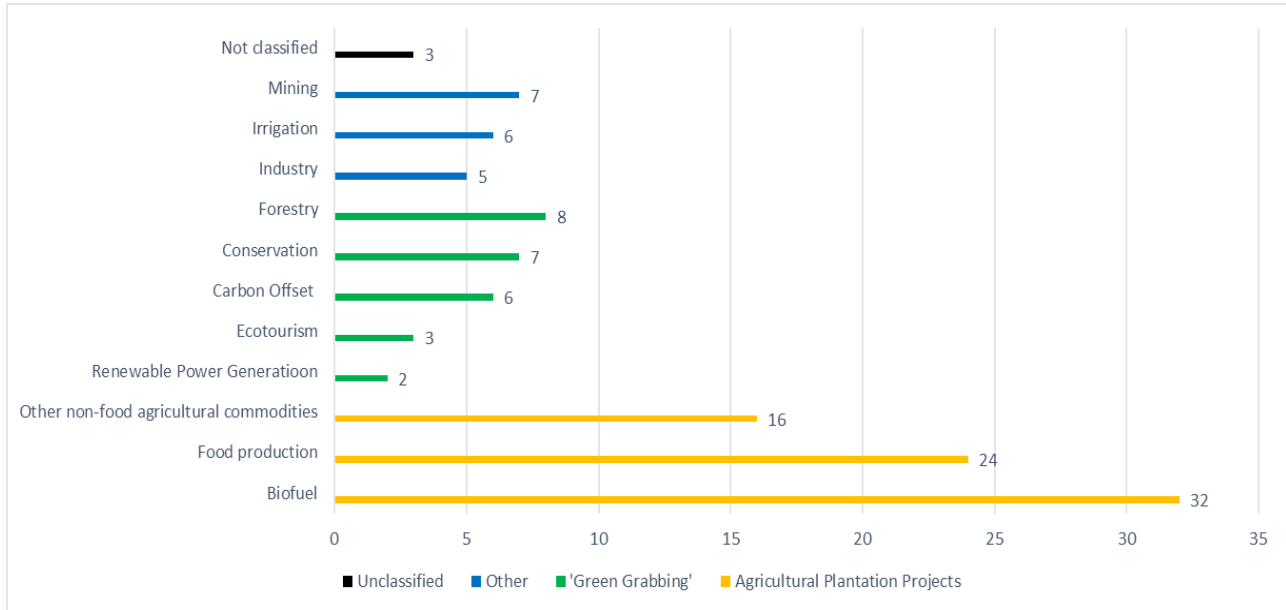


Figure 4. Reported LSLA purpose³

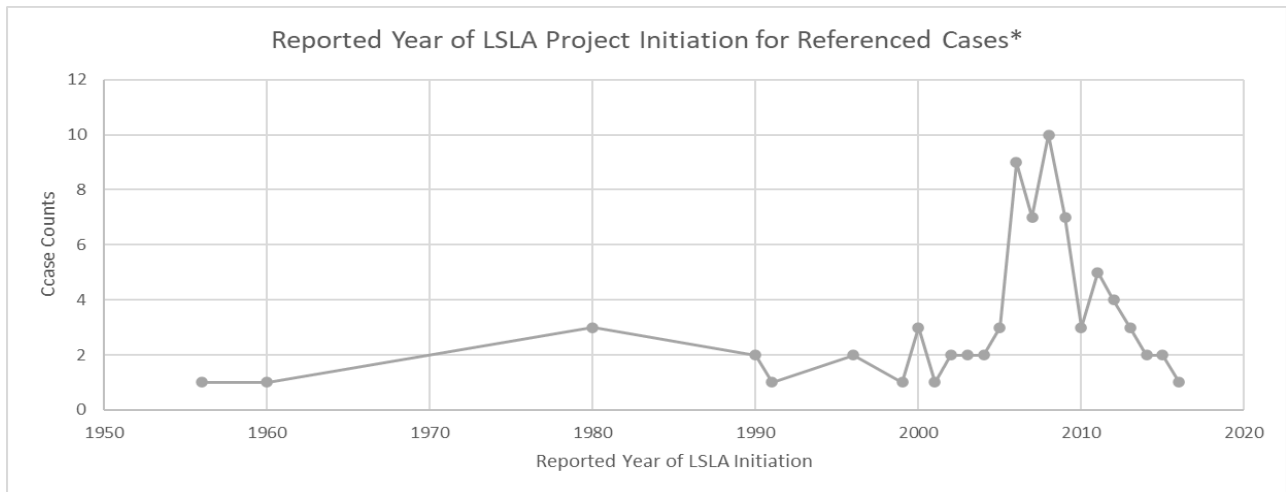


Figure 5. Reported Year of Project Initiation. * Comprising 77 total cases for which there is information on project initiation year.

³ For the results of this section, note that the same case may fit into multiple purpose categories, so the total count of cases does not sum up to 98, which is the total number of cases referenced for this synthesis

Overall, 72 cases involved agricultural plantations, including those intended for the production of biofuel crops, commercial food crops, and other non-food agricultural commodities. A total of 26 cases represented LSLAs attributed to “green grabs” proposed for carbon offsets, conservation reserves, reforestation, renewable power generation, and ecotourism. An additional 18 cases involved LSLAs for mining, urban development, and dam construction (see Figure 4). From 51 case studies for which land contract sizes were identified, a total of 37 land deal sizes were greater than 10,000 ha (med = 19,843 ha). Overall, investment contracts across the 98 included cases were signed between 1956-2016, contracts signed between 2005-2014 make up half of all included LSLA cases, reflecting land grab patterns attributed to the financial crisis of 2007-2008 (see Figure 5). While case studies cannot be representative of the thousands of LSLA cases occurring across the globe, the temporal and geographic distribution, intended purpose, and scale of included cases resemble investment patterns outlined in global databases ([Nolte et al., 2016, pp. 7-18](#)).

Land Grabbing as Distributive Injustice

Gonzalez (2016) defines distributive justice as “ the equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of economic activity as well as equitable access to environmental amenities and necessities ” (p 233). Distributive environmental justice, in its most basic form, considers fairness in the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits (Holland, 2020, p 71). In the context of LSLAs, distributive justice arises when those suffering the greatest harm did not share equally in the benefits provided by land-use

change dynamics spurred by such investments (Kaswan, 2021; Gonzalez, 2016). Drawing from this framework, cases were coded for 1) community livelihood outcomes and 2) overall environmental impacts.

Community Livelihood Outcomes

From 98 referenced cases, 55 case studies determined LSLA occurrences to have a net negative economic impact on local communities, 30 cases reported mixed outcomes, and 13 reported unclear or mixed outcomes. The following passages provide a summary of commonly referenced themes and topics regarding the overall effects of LSLAs on community livelihood outcomes.

Physical and In-place Displacement

Increasing interest in land contributes to the unequal distribution of harm to local communities as they may face the possibility of displacement and expulsion. In total, 34 out of 98 case studies reported displacement and expulsion as a direct negative impact of land grabs. This displacement takes on different forms and is described across case studies as outcomes in which native land users are physically expelled from their traditional land holdings (n = 32), or more subversively, displaced “in place” from the loss of control over vital resources within their communities (n=2). The most common characterization of displacement by land grabs includes outright physical eviction, wherein native land users at the community and household level are displaced through the use of violent force and/or more coercive means, such as promises of benefits or restitution. A qualitative study by Pietilainen and Otero (2018), for example, described the process of ‘forceful expulsion’

(Harvey, 2003, p 145) spurred by palm oil companies in Guatemala, who had used state-affiliated police and military troops to expel native inhabitants to clear land for plantations.

Reported processes of ‘forceful expulsion’ are linked within LSLA literature with a wide range of negative outcomes, including disruption to livelihood activities (n= 51), increased community tension from land competition (n = 16), heightened food insecurity (n = 11), and sustained cultural losses of ancestral and traditional practices tied to land holdings (n = 8). While the majority of cases focused on physical displacement attributed to land grab processes, two case studies also expanded on such discussions to include dynamics of ‘in-place’ (Witter 2013, 417) displacement. For example, Lunstrum (2014) concluded from community interviews that an LSLA led by the Mozambican state further escalated human-wildlife conflicts and reduced local capacities to conduct traditional farming activities. Pre-existing land users, in this case, suffered from displacement not as a direct result of evictions from land-holdings, but rather as a consequence of land management controls by outside actors. Similar analyses of ‘in-place displacement’ by Work et al. (2019) have further emphasized calls within the literature to redefine analyses of ‘land grabs’ beyond issues of land tenure to consider more ‘invisible forms of land dispossession’ (Li and Pan, 409).

Deepening Inequality at the Community Level

While the majority of cases attribute LSLAs with negative livelihood outcomes, 30 cases also acknowledged how such investments could potentially benefit the livelihoods of pre-existing land users. Positive LSLA outcomes commonly cited within the literature involve increased employment opportunities (n = 25) as well as monetary support for

infrastructure and technological development provided on the part of investors for existing land users (n = 15). Access to these resources, however, was reported across 30 cases to exacerbate existing inequalities within community groups. A case reported by Baird (2011), for example, found that while a Vietnamese rubber plantation project in Laos did create job opportunities for existing land users, community surveys suggest that approximately 64% percent of those who pursued employment within the plantation did not receive full-time employment offers despite having lost a considerable quantity of land to investors. This finding underscores a central recurring theme reported by scholars on the linkage between LSLAs and employment: investors need people's land but not necessarily their labor, creating greater competition for available opportunities and allowing room for discriminatory hiring practices to occur. For example, Baird's findings also indicated that employment opportunities were offered only to those between the ages of 18 and 45, while the weak, old, disabled, as well as women with young children, were explicitly prohibited from working on the plantations. A total of 25 cases also characterized employment opportunities offered by LSLA investors as exploitative, offering workers pay incommensurate to the level of danger and labor required. In Indonesia, a case involving palm oil plantations reported dangerous working conditions involving pesticide exposure without proper protective equipment (White, 2012). Employers, however, routinely violated income and labor rights by refusing to contribute towards medical expenses and taking pay deductions without justification.

Technological transfers or the sharing of skills, equipment, and resources from investors and existing land users were also reported to deepen existing inequalities within communities. In Mozambique, a study by Porsani et al. (2017) concluded that while

Chinese investor groups did offer yield-boosting technologies such as modern tractors, pre-germinated seeds, and new fertilizers to farmers residing in the LSLA area, they were only offered to medium-scale farmers who had stronger financial capabilities to fulfill the company's contract farming agreements. Small-holder farmers, who received on average less than one-fifth of their lost fields as compensation, were unable to receive technological assistance from the company (Porsani et al., 2017). In Vietnam, a case examined by Dao (2015) found that while rubber plantation investors did construct new local hospitals and schools, access to these resources were strictly limited to community members who had agreed to contribute land. Those who refused to give up land were excluded from receiving local health care services and better schooling opportunities for their children. Community members who had expressed initial opposition to the rubber plantation project cited fears of such exclusions as reasons for their eventual agreement to surrender land to investors.

Overall, referenced case studies point to disparities in community livelihood outcomes as a result of LSLA investments. The distribution of risks and harms resulting from shifting land changes, either from physical expulsion or indirect displacement, are disproportionately borne by pre-existing land users. Resulting benefits from LSLA occurrences for community groups, while present, can be unequally distributed, and in some cases, used by investors as a coercive mechanism to expand control over existing land holdings.

Environmental Outcomes

In total, 36 cases associated LSLA occurrences with negative environmental outcomes. The types of LSLAs most commonly associated with ecosystem degradation are

agriculture and mining projects involving the conversion of forested landscapes to monocultures or stripped land. In this context, commonly referenced topics related to environmental harm include deforestation, fragmentation of forest cover, vegetation depletion, biodiversity loss, water pollution, water depletion, and soil degradation (Masum, 2015; Busscher, 2020; Andrianto, 2019; Sulierman, 2018; Purdon; 2013). For example, polluted water and river resources have been reported as a consequence of mining operations in Ghana, where a survey of 137 households revealed that 90 percent of residents linked contamination directly to small-scale mining operations (Hausermann, 2018). In Zimbabwe, irrigation needs for a biofuel project were found to have reduced water availability for surrounding farmland areas, subsequently leading to a reduction in overall water quality (Mutopo, 2014). Several case studies also revealed that land grabbing in urban areas has led to severe declines in water, soil, and air quality for surrounding regions. For example, Li and Pan (2021) concluded from surveys across three surrounding communities that gaseous and wastewater emissions from an industrial park construction project in southern China were linked to the contamination of groundwater supplies and declines in perceived air quality.

In total, 8 out of 98 case studies outlined linkages between LSLAs and negative environmental consequences to community health outcomes for existing land users. Commonly referenced themes regarding community health effects related to LSLAs involved toxic chemical exposure (Sulieyman, 2014; Chilombo, 2021), malnutrition (Drbohlav and Hejkrlik, 2018), and disease outbreaks (Pietilainen and Otero, 2019). These reports, while largely qualitative, offer a general understanding of how local land users perceive and respond to health outcomes attributed to LSLA occurrences. Interviews

conducted with Indigenous groups in Guatemala, for example, revealed accounts of community illness attributed to wastewater discharge from nearby lands 'grabbed' for oil refineries (Pietilainen and Otero, 2019). These perceived threats to personal health and well-being are increasingly used by scholars within LSLA literature to articulate the process of "expulsion by pollution" (Li and Pan 2014, p 414; Friis and Nielsen, 2016), wherein communities are displaced from their native land not as a direct result of "grabbed land", but rather from the indirect consequences of such transactions on surrounding environmental resources. Considerations of "expulsion by pollution" as well as "in-place" displacement, both serve to expand dominant framings of land dispossession related to LSLAs beyond physical eviction processes. Additionally, they call attention to the importance of evaluating short- and long-term outcomes for communities within as well as in proximity to 'grabbed' land.

The association of LSLAs to negative environmental outcomes, however, is not reflective of all cases included in this study. Two cases associated conservation related LSLAs to improvements in biodiversity, forest cover retention, and wildlife health (Kuusaama, 2017; German et al., 2017). Community outcomes for these LSLAs, however, were mixed. For example, a study by Kuusaana (2017) reported that an LSLA dedicated to creating forest and game reserves in Ghana has provided education on biodiversity- particularly economic and medicinal tree species, along with bushfire prevention techniques, to community members. Investments in irrigation projects undertaken as part of the biodiversity program also resulted in improved community access to local water channels, creating a win-win scenario for biodiversity retention and overall community outcomes. In contrast to this narrative, another study by German et al. (2016) found that

progressive enclosures of land for wildlife rehabilitation in Kenya have led to the expulsion of pastoralists from their own land. Subsequent decisions by Kenya's national government and conservation partners to create additional 'no-take' buffer zones between pastoralist land holdings and wildlife corridors have also resulted in livestock losses to wildlife predation, directly impacting pastoralists traditional livelihood activities.

While the influence of land grabs on community outcomes are highly context dependent, data from case studies indicate that 1) environmental degradation linked to LSLA processes can result in negative community outcomes and 2) environmental improvements related to LSLAs are not synonymous to positive community outcomes. Across all environmental outcome scenarios, communities face potential losses or restrictions to natural resources, pointing to the maldistribution of negative outcomes involved in some LSLA processes. Hence, regional impacts on community livelihood outcomes, in addition to resource access restrictions, may both contribute to distributive justice concerns irrespective of environmental outcomes.

Land Grabbing as Procedural Environmental Injustice

Procedural environmental justice is concerned with fairness in decision-making processes which dictate environmental outcomes. As defined by Holland (2021), a procedurally just process is most often defined as "people's opportunity to participate in environmental decisions, particularly in terms of whether the processes are inclusive and fair" (p 72). LSLAs contribute to procedural injustice when they initiate land use changes without sufficient assessments of human rights and environmental outcomes with pre-existing land users who bear the brunt of these impacts (Gonzalez, 2016). Informed by this

framework, LSLAs dynamics were coded for the presence of 1) consultation processes and 2) factors inhibiting participation in consultation processes.

Community Exclusion as Procedural Injustice

Out of 98 total referenced cases, 39 cases reported that community members were consulted in decision making processes, 29 cases reported that community members were not informed and consulted, and 30 cases did not report details on community inclusion. Of the 39 cases which reported community consultation taking place, 23 deemed processes of community involvement to be insufficient in regards or perfunctory in nature. Common concerns were raised across these 23 cases on consultations which occurred: 1) exclusively with community leaders and other local elites , 2) exclusively with individual farmers, without community level consultations for decisions which affects all community members, 3) with little effort on the part of investors to provide adequate information to local land users, 4) by employing coercive tactics which inhibited the capacity of pre-existing land users to express their concerns, and 5) without specific arrangements for the inclusion of historically marginalized community members.

For example, a study by Smalley and Corbera (2012) found that public consultations conducted by developers for an LSLA in Kenya's Tana Delta involved large forums that inhibited the participation of women who were historically excluded from speaking in larger community meetings. In Cameroon, a case by Ndi et al. (2019) detailed community members' accounts of consultation processes involving bribery, intimidation, and coercion on the part of investors to pressure participants to surrender land. In Malawi, Fonjong (2017) described consultation processes conducted exclusively with local chiefs, a method

that community members perceived as an intentional move by foreign investors to circumvent direct community confrontation.

Reported examples of community exclusion and flawed community inclusion processes articulated across these cases point to the capacity of LSLAs to contribute toward procedural justice. The free, prior, and informed participation of all affected community members, a central pillar of procedural justice, remains unfilled in the absence of proper community consultation procedures. LSLA consultation dynamics, even in cases where they do occur, do not consistently ensure equal community participation and representation of all community groups.

Land Grabbing as Corrective Injustice

Corrective⁴ environmental justice is concerned with the capacities of marginalized communities to seek legal redress or obtain proper restitution (Day, 2020). As defined by Gonzalez (2016), LSLA processes exemplify corrective environmental injustice when affected communities 1) have no legal rights by which to seek legal recourse in the country where they reside or as part of broader legal frameworks and 2) are not compensated fairly for the harms suffered as a result of LSLA outcomes on their local environments. Informed by this framing, cases were coded for 1) community rights to legal recourse and 2) compensation for any harms associated with LSLA outcomes.

⁴ Also commonly referred to as restorative justice (Day, 2020).

Legal Rights to Land Ownership and Tenure Security

The commodification and privatization of land by external investors for LSLA transactions directly threaten local communities' claims to land ownership. Conversely, local capacities to seek legal redress for LSLA outcomes rests on external validation of community rights to land ownership. Referenced cases highlight that LSLAs often occur in areas where community rights to land control exist through informal systems, wherein the legitimacy of land use rights is perceived by community members to be embedded within historical land-use patterns. Of these cases, 23 studies took place in countries where informal land tenure rights are not recognized or governed by law, limiting local capacities to seek legal redress. For example, Work et al. (2019) reported on a reforestation project in Cambodia in which tree plantation enclosures included areas used by local communities for shifting cultivation, resin tapping, and collecting non-timber products. Community claims to land use rights, which had been in place for generations, were dismissed via a decision by Cambodia's national government to designate the area as 'degraded forest'. Such designations allowed project investors, notably the subsidiary of a South Korean explosives developer, to legally bypass existing national and international policies to ensure social accountability. In total, 18 additional cases reported similar scenarios in which designations of communal land as 'degraded', 'empty', 'unused', or 'marginal' were employed by governments to legitimize eventual classifications of such areas as state property (Delang, 2012; Martiniello; 2015; Ahmed, 2019; Morgan, 2017).

A total of 11 cases also took place in countries where informal land tenure rights are recognized and governed by customary law. However, losses of land control, access, and customary rights were recorded across all 11 cases as a consequence of slow or opposing

legislative processes. For example, a wind power development project involving 150,000 acres of community land legally protected by Kenya's National Law continued without interruption despite active lawsuits filed by residents to contest the "unprocedural and illegal" acquisition by investors (Achiba, 2018). Delays in the determination of the court, as well as local government support for the project, allowed investors to continue developing wind power sites despite widespread community opposition. In Indonesia, investors of an oil palm plantation were allowed to continue project development following court rulings favorable to the state. Determination of the project site as state land, in this case, directly clashed with a prior court ruling which purported to recognize customary rights to forest land (Elmhirst et al., 2017).

Corrective injustice in the context of LSLAs, as the above cases have shown, is perpetuated in areas with and without legal protection for traditional land tenure rights. The capacity of community members to pursue legal recourse against 'grabbed' land remains limited in countries with national policies which actively seek to diminish claims to traditional land tenure. State recognition of traditional land ownership, however, does not consistently afford protection for local communities against grabbed land; legislative processes on which native land users rely may be heavily influenced by the priorities of the state, further limiting pathways for legal recourse.

Community Compensation

In total, 60 LSLA cases noted plans for community compensation, 11 cases reported that no compensation plans were in place, and 27 cases did not include details on compensation measures. Across the 60 cases which involved some form of compensation

for affected communities, 58 cited concerns surrounding compensation schemes that were: 1) perceived by community members to be incommensurable to the level of harm that had been done (n= 36), 2) administered only to a select few within affected community groups (n=13), 3) promised, but had yet to materialize following project initiation (n = 8), and 4) offered only after continuous protest and disputes between investors and communities involved (n = 5).

For example, Ogwang (2017) reported on a case in Uganda where government compensation measures, calculated from valuations of community property without consultation with local groups, were perceived by community members to be insufficient to address the level of harm caused by resettlement. In Laos, Delang et al. (2012) reported on a case involving coffee plantation investors who only compensated villagers for areas of land designated by their company as 'productive' for coffee growing. Villagers who had lost land designated as 'forested' or 'poorly maintained', however, did not receive compensation despite having formal titles to their land. In Tanzania, a commercial agriculture LSLA project won the support of community members when government actors and investors promised the allocation of new land and cash compensation. However, affected villagers reported that these promises have remained unfulfilled since the project's inception five years prior (Nkansah-Dwamena and Raschke, 2021). In Cameroon, the refusal of foreign investors to compensate displaced villagers resulted in massive protests in which native residents blocked local roads leading to company offices and plantations. Following interventions by local chiefs, cash compensation was eventually paid to displaced community members (Fonjong, 2017).

While the majority of studies highlighted the absence or the insufficiency of compensation plans involved in LSLA processes, a total of two studies reported community satisfaction with compensation given by investors as part of LSLA transactions. Negotiations processes reported within these studies suggest that compensation schemes were planned out with the active engagement of local farmers and native land users (Ofuoku and Oghene, 2016; Salverda and Nkonde, 2011). For example, an agribusiness venture reported by Salverda and Nkonde (2011) consulted smallholder farmers with and without formal land titles residing within project areas on appropriate compensation schemes. Farmers who were willing to relocate received new land plots and newly constructed brick houses, while those who wished to remain were allowed to retain land. Both groups were subsequently given formal title deeds to their land regardless of whether they had legal title deeds before the company's arrival.

Community compensation involved in LSLA processes, as previous case examples have shown, does not consistently align with community perceptions of fairness. In the absence of proactive, timely, and inclusive compensation processes, LSLA dynamics may further contribute to corrective injustice. The relative success of some compensation schemes, such as those noted by Salverda and Nkonde (2011), point to the importance of inclusive community consultation in negotiation processes as well as the recognition of tenure rights on the part of investors, particularly in the absence of formal land tenure recognition.

Land Grabbing as Social Injustice

As defined by Gonzalez (2016), social environmental justice is “inextricably intertwined with other forms of social and economic justice and cannot be attained without combating related social ills” (p 233). Within LSLA literature, social environmental justice concerns are embedded in historical perspectives, such as those associated with colonial experiences and their ties to the global dispossession of native populations across time and space (White et al., 2012; Del-Angelo, 2016; Gonzalez, 2016). The focus of these discussions has centered on describing the imbalanced power relations between investors and pre-existing land users, as well as the capacity of such imbalances to create conditions favorable to investors alone (Del-Angelo, 2016; Gonzalez, 2016). Drawing from this framing, LSLA cases were coded for characterizations of power imbalances, particularly between investors and native-land users, across global, national, regional, and local scales.

LSLA Stakeholder Composition

At the global level, land grab dynamics are embedded in an international economic order framed by scholars as a neo-colonial push by foreign actors from capital-rich countries (the Global North) to amass key natural resources in more vulnerable states (The Global South) at the expense of vulnerable states, people, and nature (Hall, 2011; Gonzalez, 2016). Such characterizations of North-South relations within assessments of LSLAs have focused on describing patterns of land transfers between members of host states in the Global South, particularly in previously colonized nations, to powerful foreign industry actors from wealthier nations in the Global North (Margulis et al. 2017; Gonzalez, 2016; Borras et al., 2011). While attention to North-South dynamics continues to dominate LSLA

literature, trends in case study publications also reflect the prevalence of South-South dynamics in this context. From the 78 case studies for which investor origin data were available, sources of foreign investments were affiliated with countries in Asia (30%), Europe (24%), Africa (4%), North America (4%), the Middle East (3%), and the South Pacific (1%). Overall, countries with the most associated foreign LSLAs include China (n=7), followed by the United Kingdom (n = 5), Vietnam (n= 5), Norway (n= 4), and Korea (n= 4). Such heightened attention to China's role reflects an emerging concern over the imbalance between the country's rise in global capitalism and commitment to international development cooperation (Dwyer and Vongvisouk, 2017).

In comparison to investor origin, documented cases were predominantly concentrated in Africa (55.6%), followed by Asia (36.4%), Latin America (5.05%), with much fewer case studies conducted from Europe (1.01%), the South Pacific (1%), and the Caribbean (1%).⁵ Across 98 cases, 36 countries were represented as host nations of LSLAs, with the majority of cases taking place in Cambodia (n= 15), Ghana (n = 13), Tanzania (n = 7), Mozambique (n = 5), and Laos (n= 5). Cases were predominantly assessed within countries associated with the Global South, with very few cases documented in countries within the Global North. Such trends indicate that, while investors and beneficiaries of land grabs may be associated with either the Global North or the Global South, assessments of LSLAs continue to be limited to countries typically associated with the Global South.

More recent empirical research on LSLAs has also noted the importance of domestic investors in driving global land competition. At the national level, cases highlight the role of

⁵ No case studies from the Middle East passed the initial selection phase, and as such are not included within this study.

government-affiliated agencies and state-owned companies both directly as investors (n = 23) and indirectly as facilitators and supporters of foreign acquisitions within their own countries (n = 82), particularly where traditional land usage and rights have not been formally recognized within national legal frameworks (Zoomers 2010; Borrás et al. 2011; Borrás et al. 2012; White et al. 2012). A total of 12 cases also cited private commercial companies owned by local elites with ties to government agents or foreign capital as principal investors driving LSLAs within local communities. At the community level, cases also classified domestic actors as urbanites (Lusasi, 2020), large-scale farmers (Ahmed et al., 2019; Sulieman, 2018), ranchers (Rodríguez-de-Francisco; 2021), intra-family members (Kansanga, 2018), and local elites (Uson, 2017) as central investors in LSLAs.

At this level, analysis of social justice issues is centered on income, gender, and ethnic discrimination, rather than the flow of foreign capital (Busscher, 2019). Assessments of intra-community differences in LSLA outcomes were focused on small-scale farmers (n=31), women (n= 28), migrant landless laborers (n= 14), indigenous minority members (n= 4), pastoralists (n= 4), and older farmers (n =2) within native land user groups. For example, a study by Hausermann et al. (2018) analyzed a case of gold mining investment that led to the exacerbation of inequality for women in Ghana's Offin River Region. Interviews with 67 community members led to the conclusion that women had greater difficulty accessing new land following losses of nearby farmland due to land grabbing initiated for mining activities. This is attributed in part to extensive household responsibilities (childcare, cooking, washing, etc.) expected of women within the community, limiting their capacity to travel extensive distances to access arable land. As reported by Hausermann et al. (2018), women's expected labor and long-standing

structural conditions inhibiting women's land ownership capacities further resulted in disparate outcomes for women following an LSLA occurrence within the community. While such distinctions and associated attributions of impacts are highly context-dependent, they emphasize the importance of scale in determining the extent to which LSLA processes are embedded within existing social injustices at the local level.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The 2007-2008 food and energy crisis triggered heightened academic attention on land acquisitions, which in turn has given rise to a rich body of literature on LSLAs within and outside of academia. At the global level, compilations of macro-level information collected by independent monitoring initiatives such as the Land Matrix have made it possible to understand and anticipate global geographic and temporal trends associated with land grab occurrences. However, information collected by the Land Matrix has raised concerns over data reliability and availability. The use of online and media sources, as well as the absence of data on local processes linked to community and environmental outcomes, necessitates continuing efforts to assess LSLAs at the local level.

More recent efforts to document and study LSLA dynamics via case studies have contributed further to our collective understanding of related actors, networks, outcomes, responses, and themes at the community level. The information available through such case studies, however, remains embedded in local contexts and scattered across a multitude of academic journals and institutions, limiting their capacity to contribute to an ongoing global debate around the overall impact of LSLAs on the lives of native land users (Yang and He, 2021). While previous meta-synthesis studies have organized available case study information, these too, are guided by different foci directed at specific outcomes, themes, and stakeholders (Dell'Angelo et al., 2016; Vliet, 2016; Vandergeten, 2016). A recent meta-study by Yang and He (2021), as one of the most current comprehensive meta-synthesis of existing research on land grabbing, remains limited in its cursory assessment of community outcomes and responses.

An environmental justice framework, such as one articulated by Gonzalez (2016), can provide valuable guidelines by which to holistically synthesize, assess, and understand LSLA case study material. An environmental justice meta-analysis of case studies creates a narrative around LSLA outcomes that remains grounded in justice and ethics and centered on the well-being of communities. Its application in this synthesis highlights some themes that can better facilitate understanding of how LSLAs are changing landscapes and local livelihoods globally:

1. LSLAs are associated with the maldistribution of harms and benefits between investors and existing local communities. The expansion of LSLAs, both in cases with and without the physical expulsion of native land users, may disproportionately impact the livelihoods, health, and cohesion of affected communities. The benefits they confer through job creation and technological aid can amplify existing inequalities, particularly where determinations of beneficiaries lie solely under the jurisdiction of investors.
2. Community consultation processes, when they do occur, are characterized by various forms of coercion, as in cases where negotiation procedures systematically exclude women or were carried out only with local chiefs to circumvent direct communication with broader community groups.
3. LSLAs may weaken the overall stability of land tenure security in areas with and without legal recognition of land tenure rights. Legal recognition of community claims to land tenure, in nations where they do exist, may be insufficient to guarantee just LSLA outcomes, particularly where national development plans are prioritized over judicial precedent. Compensations offered to impacted land users,

as a result, are in many cases insufficient to address the level of harm and losses associated with such acquisitions.

4. LSLA processes are generally defined by imbalanced power relations between involved stakeholders across global, regional, and local scales. This imbalance is inextricably intertwined with wider social justice issues embedded in historical precedents. While the nuances of present social injustices remain highly context-specific, case studies show that they can: 1) amplify existing inequalities, particularly for vulnerable states, racial and ethnic minorities, and women, and 2) make it difficult to assess the overall impacts of LSLAs before their initiation.

As previously emphasized by Dell' Angelo et al. (2016), associated themes identified across cases will not be statistically representative of all LSLA occurrences. Limitations posed by available data and the potential for contextual bias necessitate continuous efforts to replicate and refine future meta-synthesis studies. Additionally, the diversity of theoretical approaches to studying LSLAs, as well as its limited application within environmental justice research, poses additional challenges to this synthesis. To highlight and compare LSLA outcomes, future case studies may benefit from structuring research designs under an environmental justice framework. The incorporation of an environmental justice framework, in this context, remains centered on its capacity to show emerging associations and patterns critical to present understandings of why LSLA policies must change.

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APPENDIX A

Supplementary Materials

All codes, databases, and affiliated articles are available online at:

[https://airtable.com/appWQxEJ4oVTpsnJ9/tblEfPS5TU1r0Rfds/viwx2uG5Ahsmm
AoBh?blocks=hide](https://airtable.com/appWQxEJ4oVTpsnJ9/tblEfPS5TU1r0Rfds/viwx2uG5AhsmmAoBh?blocks=hide)