

Dynamics of Contemporary Land Grabbing and Agrarian Transformations in Chile (2007-2021)

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Abstract

This article discusses agricultural changes and the dynamics of contemporary land grabbing in Chile between 2007 and 2021. This case study provides a good example for analyzing, from national and subnational perspectives, what is happening in other geographical areas of Latin America. Based on descriptive statistical techniques and a review of specialized materials on the subject, the results suggest that contemporary agricultural changes in Chile are determined by global demand for primary products, where control of land has shifted from remote regions with so-called "unproductive lands" to areas of high value for the production of food and non-food products such as fruit growing and forestry. Companies promote forms of land control at the subnational level, but also at the intraregional level. The forms of land grabbing are varied, including acquisitions, traditional land purchase procedures, or leases to reduce investment risks. One of the most important dynamics is the increase in land acquisition for the production and export of cherries in recent years, making it one of the food products of greatest interest to the Chilean economy. Therefore, in view of the increased demand for land associated with this and other products, it will be important to consider the creation of

explicit public policies to regulate land grabbing, otherwise social gaps and the precariousness of life in the most vulnerable rural sectors may increase.

Introduction

Land grabbing is a study topic of great global importance because it exacerbates inequality in access to land and produces problems in rural areas such as precariousness, instability, and unsustainability, hindering the social reproduction of Afro-descendant, peasant, and indigenous peoples (Nahuelhual et al., 2024). Since the late 1990s, changes in global political economy and the convergence of multiple crises (financial, food, energy, and environmental) revitalized and reoriented the dynamics of land grabbing (Borras et al., 2011; Margulis et al., 2013). Dominant narratives maintain that to face the challenges of multiple crises, it is necessary to have reserves of agricultural, marginal, isolated, or empty lands that are sparsely populated, do not require displacing a large number of people, and allow increasing productivity while generating local livelihoods and jobs (Borras et al., 2014; Borras & Franco, 2013). However, the results can increase inequalities in access to land and greater problems for the rural population and peasantry.

For some international organizations (World Bank, 2010), land grabbing can be an economic opportunity for poor people in rural areas. But more critical perspectives (Amanor, 2013; Fairhead et al., 2012; Borras et al., 2012a) point out that land grabbing threatens the lives and livelihoods of local populations due to the social, economic, environmental, political, and demographic impacts it generates. Critical studies (Soto & Gómez, 2014; Temper, 2019; Dell'Angelo et al., 2021) have demonstrated how the control of land by large corporations often grants political power to landowners, hindering democratic processes at the local level by creating powers parallel to state powers and configuring conflicts between companies, the State, and communities.

The economic conditions of small producers are impacted by limiting the labor supply and in certain cases turning them into tenants or wage laborers, which increases the dependence of the rural population on economic groups as well as precariousness and poverty, since companies concentrate wealth (Soto & Gómez, 2014; Borras et al., 2014). Environmental damages such as land-use changes, pollution, and the overexploitation of

water resources—which lead to water dispute processes and parallel dynamics of water grabbing and unsustainable uses of natural resources—are not considered (Soto & Gómez, 2014; Mehta et al., 2012; Franco et al., 2013). In addition, internal population displacements can be gestated for productive, extractive, or conservation purposes termed green grabbing (Soto & Gómez, 2014; Fairhead et al., 2012).

The traditional view of land grabbing defines it as the purchase of land by a foreign government on a scale of 1,000 hectares or more, whose productive use is oriented toward food (Soto & Gómez, 2014). A more comprehensive definition proposes viewing contemporary land grabbing as "the power to control land and other natural resources in order to extract benefits," modifying the meaning and/or use of land and resources (Borras et al., 2012b, p. 404). The scale is not limited to 1,000 hectares and contemplates other spatial dimensions according to capital investment, as it can be a large investment without requiring a vast expanse of land (Borras et al., 2012a). Likewise, land grabbing goes beyond the food sector and includes other non-food sectors such as mining, forestry, and conservation (Borras et al., 2014).

In recent years, academic production on contemporary land grabbing has gained greater strength, with broader studies on the relationship between land control and current capital accumulation strategies, corporate and non-corporate land grabs, and their diverse scales including small cuts or pin pricks (Borras & Franco, 2025; Wolford et al., 2024; Edelman, 2016). In Latin America, progress has also been made with studies on how global demand for primary commodities conditions land grabbing (Borras et al., 2014) with greater relations and transactions between countries of the same region (Borras et al., 2012a), the prominence of national and transnational capitals (Sauer & de Castro, 2020), financial links between land and commodity production (Gras, 2017), and the social and environmental impacts of these processes (Torres-Mazuera, 2023). Although these studies comprise valuable contributions, this work seeks to follow this path and contribute to the literature with greater empirical evidence on the subject.

The objective consists of analyzing agrarian changes and contemporary dynamics of land grabbing based on the case of Chile between 2007-2021, which corresponds to the last two periods of the agricultural and forestry census. Chile's experience is ideal for this study because it is one of the countries with the most dynamic land markets in Latin America

(Panez & Olea, 2024). Since 1973, during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, the ongoing agrarian reform was halted, and the free purchase and sale of land was promoted to the benefit of the most powerful economic sectors and to the detriment of peasants (Echenique, 2012). Currently, this trend maintains itself, accompanied by high levels of inequality in access to land (Mansilla & Uribe, 2023). In 2021, 0.58% of Agricultural Production Units (APUs) controlled 88.9% of the land in areas with more than 2,000 ha (INE, 2021). Therefore, it is expected that the results obtained here can serve to contrast other cases with similar problems in the Latin American region.

Conclusions

The objective of the article was to analyze the main agrarian changes and the dynamics of contemporary land grabbing in Chile between 2007-2021. Unequal land distribution remains at high levels in remote and extreme regions; what is novel is that, although in 2007 land distribution did not have the outsized magnitude it appeared to—since regions with the highest land grabbing were located in extreme zones with large surfaces of unproductive terrain and natural formations of low agro-forestry value (Echenique, 2012)—in the 2007-2021 period, changes in land distribution are observed in regions with more heterogeneous agrarian structures possessing land of great agricultural and forestry potential.

In the regions where land control grew the most in areas greater than 2,000 hectares, the cultivated area of forestry and fruit-growing sectors also increased the most. This is related to the contemporary dynamics of land grabbing, as it is associated with the productive use of land and the global demand for primary products, which fosters greater control of land for the functioning of Chile's export economic sectors, including food and non-food products such as fruit and cellulose.

The results coincide with previous studies (Borras et al., 2012a) and demonstrate the relevance of going beyond traditional explanations of land grabbing (Soto & Gómez, 2014), since contemporary dynamics of grabbing are not limited to the restricted participation of foreign land grabbers, but are varied and even imply a greater presence of national capital.

In Chile, companies promote forms of land control at the subnational level, but also at the intraregional level among Latin American countries, especially for forestry and fruit-growing investments. In addition, the forms of grabbing are varied, including acquisitions, mergers, traditional land purchase procedures, or leases to reduce investment risks.

The acquisition of land to produce and export cherries has grown exponentially in recent years. They have become one of the most important food products thanks to Chinese interest and the economic incentives that this country has injected to boost exports.

Due to the limitations of the study already acknowledged in the methodological section, it is recommended to expand research on the subject by including other data collection techniques and analysis methods to broaden evidence on the land uses that are affected, whether it concerns land under individual or private tenure, transactions, and specific scales among the various actors participating in the land market.

Nevertheless, the value of the obtained results is highlighted, as they provide relevant empirical information and can help explain contemporary land grabbing processes in other countries of the Latin American region. Particularly regarding changes in the agrarian structure, the productive uses of land conditioned by the global demand for food and non-food raw materials, the role of national capitals, interregional transactions, and forms of grabbing that include purchases and leases. In addition, the results warn about the problems generated by grabbing, as its continuity and expansion increase unequal access to land, socio-environmental impacts, and life precariousness, undermining stability and the possibility of having more sustainable rural societies.