



The Landgrabbers

A review by Sören Köpke

Author: Fred Pearce
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Fred Pearce is an environmental journalist well-known for his thoroughly researched works. This is also the main characteristic of his newest effort, "The Landgrabbers". Pearce's research on the global phenomenon of large-scale land acquisition, dubbed "Landgrabbing" by its critics, takes him on a journey from the wheat fields of the Ukraine to the rubber tree plantations of post-war Liberia, from the vast wilderness of Patagonia to the chaco of Paraguay. It is a huge advantage of Pearce's research that he puts the phenomenon in perspective and does not confine his focus to Africa – a continent which is nevertheless in the centre of international investment activities and rightfully takes up greater parts of the book.

Pearce makes out the important drivers of the global landrush: financial speculation has inflated food commodity prices which means rising profits are to be made from agricultural production. The growing appetite for animal protein in the most successful developing countries also has an impact – for example on the continuing soy boom. And there are always indications of the competition between food production and agricultural production of non-food commodities. Agrofuels such as bio-ethanol made from sugarcane play a huge part in the new scramble for land. Other renewable resources are equally in demand: cut flowers, rubber, timber, and pulp. Finally, even conservationists and their efforts to protect endangered species and their habitats make up part of the global landgrab that alienates local populations and deprives them of their livelihoods.

Fred Pearce's work provides a remarkable piece of solid reporting. He goes out to see these processes for himself, talks to parties involved and does his homework on their backgrounds. Pondering intentions and practices, Pearce never withholds moral judgement, but in a distinctive manner. He is careful to analyse facts and numbers. For instance, he does away with the myths of China

as a landgrabbing monster, which has been painted by some media; in reality, a lot of the reported Chinese land deals fell through.

"The Landgrabbers" is a book about actors. It likes to tell their stories, more often than not narratives of adventurous, often megalomaniac business practices. It reports delusions and failures, dangers and conflicts that come with large-scale foreign investment in land; after all, land is closely tied to human culture and identity, to knowledge about the environment, and always to political and economic power. Sometimes Pearce loses himself in the curiosity of his stories, in the kind of oddities that journalists (and readers) love so much. His account is weakest when he reverts to sheer name dropping, giving names and numbers of acquisitions that do not mean much to the reader. It is strongest when he reconnects current trends to older histories of colonialism, imperialism and intervention. Maps in the beginning of each chapter, which mostly covers one region or country, are a good feature, but some graphs and tables would have helped to visualise the numbers given in the text.

With "The Landgrabbers", Fred Pearce has created a very readable account of an urgent issue. It's major problem might be that its outdated soon, since players in the international land acquisition game change more rapidly than underlying structures. Nevertheless it will be a good starting point for many readers and is thus highly recommended.

Information about the author:

Sören Köpke is a researcher at the TU Braunschweig, Germany.