



Section II

Progress on the Right to Food

*Special Issue: Mapping the Global Food Landscape***The right to food and politics of knowledge**Philip McMichael¹

Professor and Chair, Department of Development Sociology, Cornell University

This article concerns a particular struggle over the right to food, as played out recently in the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), within the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). As a relatively new participant in the CFS, the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM), representing land-using social movement organizations and progressive non-governmental organizations (NGOs), was successful in 2010 in convincing the CFS to reject *investor-driven* Principles of Responsible Agriculture Investment (PRAI)² formulated under World Bank leadership. Instead the CFS would consider a *producer rights-driven* reformulation of “responsible agricultural investment” (rai) (CFS, 2014). In its initial drafting, the rai was framed as a rights-based initiative through which all states could implement domestic forms of food security and nutrition. Over the two years of development of the rai principles, it became increasingly clear that the “right to food” concept informed quite different visions of how to stimulate “food security”.

For the CSM, the rights-based framework requires the right to *produce* food by small-scale producers and workers. This follows from the social fact of small producers being the majority food producers across the world, and in many states a vital agrarian foundation for the realization of domestic food security. Ranged against this claim are those forces advocating global food security via export agriculture—in the form of large-scale plantations or “value

¹ The author acknowledges the support of a Research Council of Norway grant: “Cultures, Values, Ethics, Arguments and Justifications in the Management of Agricultural Land (FORFOOD)”, Center for Rural Research, Trondheim, 2013-16, and inspiration from Birgit Muller.

² Which former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, characterized as “responsibly destroying the world's peasantry” (2010).

chains” supplying global grain traders, processors, retailers, and/or agrofuels providers. Within the CFS terms of debate, this ontological divide is routinely reduced by powerful “free trader” states and their corporate counterparts in the CFS’s Private Sector Mechanism (PSM) allies to a discourse ensuring investor rights on a global scale, justified by productivist language (i.e., industrial technologies and efficiencies of production and circulation). Investor rights language seeks to coopt “food security” discourse by privileging (corporate) markets over *extant* producer rights and food sovereignty principles of reducing food dependency and supporting domestic producers and their local market systems.

Responsible agriculture investment principles

The CFS Terms of Reference to develop rai principles arose in a “food crisis” context of export bans and price volatility (McMichael, 2009), competition for land between food and fuel crops (Borras, McMichael, & Scoones, 2011), accelerated land grabbing (White, Borras, Hall, Scoones, & Wolford, 2013), and growing awareness of ecosystem degradation (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Development and multilateral agencies realised that, after decades of neglect and erosion of support for small producers, agricultural renewal was critical to rural development, food security and environmental sustainability. The CFS has recognized the overwhelming role of small-scale producers in feeding the majority world and working the land. Given its mandate to promote food security, the CFS has framed its rai initiative in the context of the progressive realization of the right to food within policies promoting national food security (Claeys, this issue). The normative framework for such rights-based, “responsible” agricultural investment is elaborated in two key publications of the CFS: a Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (CSF, 2012), and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (CFS 2013a). These reports followed several years of advocacy and leadership by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, which was instrumental in establishing the CFS’s Civil Society Mechanism (McKeon, 2015).

From the normative perspective, the members of the CFS’s Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) believe that investment in agriculture is responsible only insofar as it prioritizes the rights of small-scale producers and workers, in addition to the progressive realization of the right to food in national food security programs. This is consistent with FAO and CFS recommendations and reports regarding the special needs of small food producers and food workers, and the overwhelming preponderance of smallholder labor and cooperative investment in agriculture. Thus, the CFS’ High Level Panel of Experts Report on smallholder agriculture noted:

Smallholder agriculture is practised by families (including one or more households) using only or mostly family labour and deriving from that work a large but variable share of their income, in kind

or in cash... it includes crop raising, animal husbandry, forestry and artisanal fisheries.... Off-farm activities play an important role... in providing smallholders with additional income and as a way of diversifying risk... smallholders producing only or mainly for subsistence are not uncommon... smallholder's families are part of social networks within which mutual assistance and reciprocity translate into collective investments (mainly through work exchanges) and into solidarity systems (CFS 2013b, p. 10-11).

In addition: “Smallholder agriculture is the foundation of food security in many countries and an important part of the social/economic/ecological landscape in all countries” (Ibid, p. 11), and the “potential efficiency of smallholder farming relative to larger farms has been widely documented, focusing on the capacity of smallholders to achieve high production levels per unit of land through the use of family labour in diversified production systems” (Ibid, p. 12).

For CSM participants, investment support for small producers requires both complementary and regulatory dimensions. *Complementary* investment includes ecosystem renewal for farms and landscapes, and infrastructural support for access to water, markets and extension services. At the same time, *regulation* and monitoring of private investment is necessary to ensure protection of the rights and role of small-scale producers in enhancing domestic food security. Since small-scale producers are the majority food producers across the world,³ eradicating hunger and malnutrition and ensuring domestic food supplies require substantial increases in the level and orientation of *public* investment to ensure and enhance their role in national food provisioning (see Desmarais, Wittman, and Wolford in this issue). “Responsible investment” thus means priority investments in small-scale producers’ and food system workers’ capacities and rights to produce food for their fellow citizens. To be consistent with FAO/CFS recommendations means providing a conducive and rights-based policy framework, centered on the majority producers.

The land question, producer rights and farming models

The reasoning of the CSM with respect to the right to food is as follows: since the CFS recognizes small-scale producers as the majority food producers and investors in agriculture, the rai is only responsible insofar as it centers on stabilizing and developing local and national agri-food sectors. Land grabbing does not have this orientation or value, focusing as it does on profiting on land speculation or industrial food production for global markets (cf. Borras, et al., 2014; Akram Lodhi, this issue). In the name of producer rights and the progressive realization of

³ For example, accounting for 80% of food in Africa and Asia, 90% of fish from artisanal fishers, and up to 70% of the world's food (ETC Group, 2009).

food security and nutrition it is therefore unacceptable to allow, or even enable, the involuntary transfer of land via financial investment.

Rather than allow private investors to call the tune, by reclassifying and retitling land for private acquisition and profit, states should empower themselves to defend the public interest by protecting their agrarian capacity. This programmatic vision advocated by the CSM has had difficulty gaining traction, arguably because most states in the global South depend on export revenues to defray debt and to purchase staple foods to meet food dependency needs (see Murphy, this issue). In other words, the systematic privatization of states, by which public capacity has been dismantled and/or sold off to private interests, has reduced the ability of governments to rekindle public investment, entrenching a neoliberal reflex by which state policies favor market solutions. These structuring forces are reinforced now by the rising incidence of public-private partnerships (PPP), as initiatives like the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (NAFSN) subordinate public policy to private investment and corporate markets (see McKeon, this issue), and the World Bank's new program of *Benchmarking the Business of Agriculture* to "identify areas of improvement" for competing for financial investments.⁴ Alongside such developments, while the CFS/HLPE report on smallholder investments (2013b) recognizes "smallholders as the main investors in agriculture" the rai principles undermine that statement by affirming the truism that they are the main investors only *in their own* agriculture.

A recurring theme in rai discussions was that rai is for *all* investors, big and small, and that rai itself is about enabling the capitalization of agricultural resources. The PSM and government allies (in particular the U.S., Canada and Australia) routinely lump "smallholders" with "large-holders" as if they practice the same kind of agriculture, and in the name of balance. This artificial balancing of different 'stakeholders' pervades the CFS dialogue. It is artificial for two main reasons: (1) some 'stakeholders' are more equal than others—that is, large investors have more resources and lobbying power, their interests coincide with cash-strapped governments, and they drive, and benefit from, land grabs; (2) there is no "balance" between large and small "investors" because their forms of investment are incommensurate and incompatible. Accordingly, investment principles apply neither *equally* nor *similarly* across this divide. Gaining traction with this distinction has also been ultimately unsuccessful, given the hegemony of a financial understanding of investment—which combines a modernist assumption that industrial technologies should replace labor as the measure of progress, with a general stigmatization of agricultural labor as if it has no scientific dimension (Ploeg, 2009).

Small producers and large investors do not share a single vision and mode of operation. Large-scale investors favor commercial input-output "agriculture without farmers", as Vía Campesina notes, overriding the natural resource base with alien seeds and agro-chemicals.

⁴ The Bank's "benchmarking producers comparisons and contrasts that will stimulate policy change" (World Bank, 2014) – policy change, that is, in the Bank mold, now termed "the process of agricultural transformation" – involving reforms "towards a more favorable enabling environment (to) support the growth and productivity of small, medium and large-scale farmers engaged in agribusiness" (Idem).

Industrial agriculture is neither sustainable nor does it have a social purpose—it is driven by distant market signals and private wealth and not the needs of local citizens. Small-scale producers, by contrast, invest in sustaining the natural resource base (soil fertility, water cycles, seed exchange and knowledge sharing networks), building a different kind of agro-ecological wealth, valuing land regeneration and reproduction of local and national communities—by necessity and/or conviction, depending on local circumstances (Ploeg, 2009, McKeon, 2015). Where “agro-ecological approaches” are mentioned they are coupled with a recommendation for “sustainable intensification”, or “smart agriculture”, via the “use of genetic intensification to increase crop yields, enable nitrogen uptake and fixation, improve nutrition and enhance resilience to pests and diseases and climate change” (The Montpellier Panel, 2013, p. 21). As above, combining these two approaches in the formal interest of “stakeholder balance” in the CFS conflates the difference between these farming models, thereby obscuring the significance of choosing between them in addressing socio-ecological resilience.⁵

Challenging times

In the CSF, the PSM and its allies claim to be simultaneously “pro-poor” and “pro-growth”, and yet “pro-growth” policies have, by the World Bank’s own admission,⁶ regularly discriminated against the poor in the name of “trickle-down” capital growth, prioritizing large investors whose market horizons do not include majority needs. This claim stems from an unproblematic assumption that any increase in investment is positive, when in fact it often involves resource grabbing at the expense of the poor and small-scale producers and agricultural workers. Resource grabbing includes land and water grabbing, as well as labor grabbing. In addition to landless labor on commercial plantations, contract “farmers” labor with agro-input packages to produce what is profitable for distant markets and retailers. Resource grabbing also includes the capture of public subsidies and credit to support private energy and agrochemical firms and their agribusiness partners, as well as philanthropic and overseas development assistance funds that overwhelmingly privilege private investment initiatives (McMichael, 2013). Increased investment may be positive for private interests, but it may weaken small producers, local food systems and markets, soil resilience, and, importantly, the will to develop public policies for domestic food security.

⁵ The IAASTD Report (2008), for instance, clarifies the difference in terms of the greater resilience of agroecology and the rights and knowledges of small-scale producers.

⁶ For example, the Bank acknowledges that earlier structural adjustment policies (which continue today): “...dismantled the elaborate system of public agencies that provided farmers with access to land, credit, insurance inputs, and cooperative organization. The expectation was that removing the state would free the market for private actors to take over these functions . . . Too often, that didn’t happen” (World Bank, 2007).

These sentiments and practices drive the predominant interpretation of the rai process as being about managing financial investment in the interests of “agriculture for development” (World Bank, 2007)—and, alarmingly, legitimize the expansion of projects such as the New Alliance (NAFSN) behind the back of the rai/Tenure Guidelines principles. The World Bank’s “agriculture for development” is a *singular* vision that prioritizes investor rights over the rights of small-scale producers to maintain and strengthen their investment in the public good rather than for private gain. Because this discourse lumps all investors together as stakeholders in “growth”, it obscures (and trivializes) the distinctive model of production of small-scale producers, as well as the adverse impact of large-scale investment in agriculture on them. In addition to involuntary transfer of land, other adverse impacts include chemicalization of the land, growing toxicity in farmworker bodies and watercourses, dispossession of farmer capacities, population “resettlement” and expansion of urban slums.

In sum, the challenge facing the CSM is to reorient the rai process: *from* the right of private investors to practice (ill-defined and voluntary) “responsible” agricultural investment *to* the right of small-scale producers to produce food in the public interest of domestic food security; and *from* private investor rights *to* the rights of farmworkers, indigenous peoples, women and other such groups to protection against exploitation. Since the rai has now been endorsed (October 15, 2014), the challenge for grassroots movements and NGOs is to monitor financial investments and their impact on and implications for human rights. This includes continuing to advocate for collective rights—to territory and to produce (rather than simply purchase) food—important dimensions in the current Peasants’ Rights Convention campaign, the objective of which “is not just to secure compliance with international norms, but to shift the norms themselves” (Edelman & James, 2011, p. 91). To reframe the question of rights in this way relates hunger to “land grab” denial of small-producer rights to their land and livelihoods, and links “sovereignty” to producer rights and productive capacities (including infrastructural needs).

Conclusion

In conclusion, to the extent that implementation of the rai eschews public policy efficacy in realizing the right to (produce) food and nutrition accomplish this, one might say the rai process represented a “land-grab trap”. That is, while the debate and subsequent set of principles regarding responsible investment were precipitated by land grabbing, the overwhelming economic language in both the debate and the final document regarding investment privileges financial investment, trivializing the significance of small-scale producers being the “main investors”, and, therefore, privileging financial over “natural” capital. Thus the process of elaboration of principles enabled the possibility of continued land acquisition at the expense of the majority producers. To avoid this “trap” the rai would have clearly distinguished between regulating financial value capture of land and related resources via corporate investment, and

supporting small-scale producers and workers as promoting multifunctional livelihood activities, with substantial ecological benefits. As it was, CSM was compelled to focus on inserting qualifiers in a document that *appears* to be about investment, but avoids really tackling it—thereby playing into the hands of the PSM, and “free-market” states such as the US, Australia and Canada. And of course the rai principles are ultimately voluntary.

This is, however, a long “war”, and rai is just a “battle” along the way. Future research should consider how to: (1) shift the goal posts in the direction of really privileging diversified small-scale land use, including documenting the multitude of socio-ecological experimentation underway across the world in various locales, (2) establish the critical need to sustain (by supporting) rural cultures which have the capacity (if adequately subsidized) to practice a more productive and resilient farming of land, forests and waterways, and address the Right to Food substantively, and (3) invert an urban-centered narrative of modernization and development, to underline humanity’s ultimate dependence on farming systems, place-based knowledge and ecological health.

References

- Borras, S.M. Jr., McMichael, P., & Scoones, I. (Eds.). (2011). *The politics of biofuels, land and agrarian change*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Borras, S. M., Jr., Franco, J. C., Isakson, R., Levidow, L., & Vervest, P. (2014). *Towards understanding the politics of flex crops and commodities: Implications for research and policy advocacy*. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute.
- CFS. (2012). *Global strategic framework for food security and nutrition*. High Level Panel of Experts. Rome: FAO.
- CFS. (2013a). *Voluntary guidelines on the governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of national food security (VGGT)*. Rome: FAO.
- CFS. (2013b). *Investing in smallholder agriculture for food security*. High Level Panel of Experts. Rome: FAO.
- CFS. (2014). *Principles for responsible investment in agriculture and food systems*. Rome: FAO. Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/3/a-ml291e.pdf>
- De Schutter, O. (2010, June 4). Responsibly destroying the world’s peasantry. Retrieved from farmlandgrab.org/13528

- Edelman, M., & James, C. (2011). Peasants' rights and the UN system: Quixotic struggle? Or emancipator idea whose time has come? *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(1), 81–108.
- ETC Group. (2009). *Who will feed us: Questions for the food and climate Crisis*. Retrieved from www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/ETC_Who_Will_Feed_Us.pdf
- IAASTD (International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development). 2008. Executive summary of the synthesis report. Retrieved from www.agassessment.org/docs/SR_Exec_Sum_280508_English.pdf
- McKeon, N. (2015). *Food security governance. Empowering communities, regulating corporations*. London & New York: Routledge.
- McMichael, P. (2009). A food regime analysis of the world food crisis. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 26(4), 281-295.
- McMichael, P. (2013). Value-chain agriculture and debt relations: Contradictory outcomes. *Third World Quarterly*, 34(4), 671–690.
- Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. (2005). *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being. Synthesis*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Montpellier Panel, The. (2013). *Sustainable intensification: A new paradigm for African agriculture*. London: Agriculture for Impact. Retrieved from <https://workspace.imperial.ac.uk/africanagriculturaldevelopment/Public/Montpellier%20Panel%20Report%202013%20-%20Sustainable%20Intensification%20-%20A%20New%20Paradigm%20for%20African%20Agriculture.pdf>
- Ploeg, van der J. D. (2009). *The 'new' peasantries. Struggles for autonomy and sustainability in an era of empire and globalization*. London: Earthscan.
- White, B., Borras, S.M. Jr., Hall, R., Scoones, I., & Wolford, W. (Eds.). (2013). *The new enclosures: Critical perspectives on corporate land deals*. London & New York: Routledge.
- World Bank. (2007). *World development report 2008: Agriculture for development*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- World Bank. (2014). *Benchmarking the business of agriculture*. Retrieved from <http://bba.worldbank.org/>