



ICARRD+20

Call for policy and position papers

Theme # 1: Access to land and water and tenure security

## Position paper of the steering committee<sup>1</sup> of the World Forum of Struggles Land and Natural Resources (SLF)

(SLF position paper #1)

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# Paper development process

The world Forum for Struggles for Land and Natural resources, which brings together networks of peasant organisations from around the world and organisations defending the commons, was formed in 2021 as a continuation of discussions held during several global meetings on agrarian and land reform since the 2004 Forum on Agrarian Reform in Valencia (FMRA), which led to the organisation of the 2006 ICARRD in Belem.

Its objective is to contribute to broadening citizen alliances and bringing together rural citizen movements, urban citizen movements and researchers in a collective reflection on the major problems related to access to land and natural resources and their use, and on the mobilisations and actions necessary to obtain the national and international regulations essential to protect and support rural, fishing and forestry communities and their use of resources in the face of land grabbers. rural, fishing and forestry communities and their use of resources in the face of land grabbers.

This position paper brings together some of the recommendations currently being developed by the network following several thematic discussions that took place through numerous public and internal webinars and several physical meetings. These discussions focused on women's and young people's access to land; the landless and the future of the commons; land struggles, from grassroots mobilisation to legal victories; land grabbing, land redistribution and the conditions for maintaining equitable distribution of land rights over time. In January 2026, the members of its steering committee examined a series of past and present agrarian and land reforms, presented by academic specialists and activists, during two webinars.

The document reiterates and updates the findings made by the forum when it opened in 2021, then lists certain legislative and policy measures that appear to be among the most urgent to implement at national and international level.

## Abstract

A scientific comparison of different forms of production leads to a clear conclusion: family farming (including livestock farming), traditional and artisanal fishing, and community forestry are best suited to ensuring the well-being of individuals and groups. They generate greater wealth per unit of land for more workers than capitalist production units with salaried employees, and they diversify agro-ecosystems, which is key to resolving world economic, ecological and climate crises.

However, land is now more than ever subject to land grabbing. Land rights are concentrated in the hands of an ever-smaller number of capital holders seeking maximum short-term profit, with disregard for the economic situation of local populations and the environment.

The measures taken by governments have not been enough to halt and reverse this trend. On the contrary, in most cases they have encouraged extractivism and the marginalisation or even displacement of rural communities.

The forum for land struggles is not giving up and is demanding the implementation of regulations on land rights transfers (property and rental rights, but also shares in agricultural companies) based on economic and ecological criteria of general interest and implemented under the control of local democratic bodies to distinguish between projects and: i. direct land towards beneficial agro-ecological uses, i.e. towards small-scale farming where those who work the land are the manager of their production units, ii. protect the territories of forest communities by recognising their control over them, and iii. give priority to small-scale fisheries in terms of access to fish resources.

## Facts

### The exploitation of natural resources for profits is destroying the planet

For more than 30 years, neo-liberal economic policies have accelerated land grabbing and the appropriation of natural resources by capitalist corporations. The leaders of these corporations and those who finance them exploit human beings as well as renewable resources in a way that depletes the latter without maintaining worthy living conditions for the former. The general expansion of agribusiness and extraction companies, as well as the expansion of urban infrastructure, leads to the plundering or appropriation of the best lands, forests, rivers and seas, and also destroys the most sustainable forms of agriculture, livestock farming, agro-forestry and fisheries. It also disproportionately affects the social groups that depend on these activities - families and rural communities, indigenous peoples - and especially women. It obscures the future of young people. The mass exodus to slums increases poverty, and the opening of new fronts of forest clearance worsens the climate crisis. It is necessary to change the way land and natural resources are governed in order to address the environmental and human disaster that we call "development".

The holders of capital - who do not themselves work on production and often do not even live where it takes place - demand maximum remuneration for their "investments". The objective of short-term financial returns in agricultural and forestry production and fisheries is inconsistent with the fair distribution of ecosystems benefits and the wealth created from them. This objective of maximising profits is also inconsistent with the preservation of water, soil fertility, biodiversity and climate. It produces a decrease in the number of employees and lowers their salaries, and has a tendency to minimise contributions to public budgets by avoiding taxes and seeking subsidies instead. Cost cutting also leads to the refusal to absorb the costs of long term environmental and agro ecological preservation, and to increasing net labour productivity through the use of new energy sources, mainly fossil fuels.

### The use of natural resources as "Commons" is promising if we make progress in gender equality

Rigorous scientific comparisons of different forms of production show us a clear result: Peasant farming in all its forms; livestock farming, traditional and artisanal fishing and community forestry; and other farms relying primarily on family labor, are far more likely to ensure individual and group well-being. Not only because they can ensure greater wealth creation per unit area for more workers and the diversification of agro-ecosystems, but also because they are at the core of our cultural identities. They call on the greater empirical intelligence of each individual to deal with the natural environment and its changes. By destroying traditional peasant knowledge and the farmer's autonomy to make decisions, agrarian proletarianisation takes away the capacity for individual and collective fulfilment.

This of course goes without saying that traditional customs very often perpetuate a regime of masculine domination and the cultural, political and socio-economic marginalisation of women. This is often demonstrated by unequal and precarious rights to land and resources, where women are often given land of lesser quality. Denying women equal rights is identical to denying women the same possibilities of well-being and fulfillment. This is all the more unacceptable as women are responsible for the majority of food production and the work necessary for the continuing existence

of the community. Revealing this truth in every place where it is denied by traditions or national laws, is a priority. It is thus fundamental to both prioritise a social transformation for the emancipation of women, all the while protecting communities against land grabbers.

## Land grabbing and the eviction of rural populations must be stopped

Land grabbing, the concentration of land rights in the hands of ever fewer people, accelerated from 2007 onwards with the so-called subprimes financial crisis. This crisis pushed large capital holders into the primary sector and provoked the takeover of vast tracts of land and forest. States have not taken any effective regulatory measures to protect rural, fisher and forestal communities. Nor have they questioned their decision, made in 1994 with the Marrakesh International Agreement on Agriculture, to liberalise global trade in agricultural products, which has had devastating consequences. The Agreement on Agriculture exposed the vast majority of farmers and fishers to direct competition from large, ultra-mechanised production units, without any form of protection. These ultra-modern farmers set rock-bottom global prices for agricultural commodities, and drive the least well-equipped families, who are also the most numerous, to ruin, as manual or animal-drawn agriculture is still the dominant model in the world today. Added to this is the extreme volatility of agricultural prices due to speculation on physical markets, but even more so on the markets that bear witness to the growing financialization of agriculture: futures markets, agribusiness stock markets, etc. The families of breeders are in the same way precarious, through the world market, by the capitalist animal production (hyper extensive or hyper intensive), as is the artisanal fishing by the industrialized fishing.

A multitude of peasant organisations and social movements, of which we are, have for decades condemned the disastrous transformation of the world's agricultural systems. These voices are standing up against the destruction of the pillars that hold up our common world: the peasants, fishing, pastoralist and forest communities, indigenous peoples. Several occasions were specifically devoted to the issue of defending their territories against land grabbers and to the redistribution of land in favor of the "landless. Among others:

1996 marked a founding stage of this global mobilization with the identification of the limits of the concept of food security brandished by the States at the World Food Summit. The World Forums for Food Sovereignty of 2001 in Havana (Cuba) and 2002 in Rome (Italy) responded to this.

In 2004, in Valencia (Spain), a number of peasant movements such as the Via Campesina, indigenous people's organisations and fishing communities, as well as experts, researchers and NGO's, with the support of the CERAI, together organised the World Forum on Agrarian Reform (WFAR). The result was that, after having been missing for decades, agrarian reform once again returned to international discussions between States: and following the FAO's call, some governments, including Brazil, organised in 2006, the International Conference of Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD).

The Food Sovereignty Forum organised by the Via Campesina, at the Nyéléni Center in Sélingué (Mali) in 2007, was a major mobilisation of peasant and rural movements that managed to maintain its momentum through regular gatherings.

In 2016, the World Forum on Access to Land (WFAL) was convened by numerous rural and urban citizen organisations, researchers and a few government institutions. The objective was to assess the pledges that had been made by governments at the ICARRD concerning more equitable land access. It quickly became obvious that the pledges had been a failure. Many national governments had then solemnly committed themselves to tackling the land issue. Ten years on however, and it

was evident that our “leaders” had done nothing substantial to remedy the urgent economic inequalities and misuse of natural resources that were undermining the planet.

## Government inaction

Despite these many years of demands, there has been no reversal of the trend. The UN "Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Governance of Land Tenure in Land, Fisheries and Forests" adopted by Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2012, or the UN "Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other Rural Workers" adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018, are the result of a hard fought struggle by global peasant movements, led by La Via Campesina. However states have been careful not to make them binding. Their unwillingness to act effectively to protect rural, fishing and forest communities is unacceptable. Their public policies continue to enhance socially, economically and environmentally destructive actions by many companies and institutions.

The major declarations of the intergovernmental assemblies (UN, CFS) have forced peasant organisations, Commons defence associations and social movements to go head to head with each State to try and achieve concrete progress: support for peasant agriculture, food sovereignty demanded by the members of La Via Campesina and many organizations, and land governance that places human beings at the heart of its objectives. In the face of the growing land and natural resource grabbing and the eviction of rural peoples, compulsory tools must be put in place at a global level.

## The impact of imperialism and the dynamics of trade liberalization and transnational investment on the land issue

This process of concentration is exacerbated by the dynamics of contemporary imperialism. Beneficiaries of agrarian extractivism, world powers and transnational investment funds often use countries in the Global South as mere reservoirs of raw materials, thereby deepening economic dependence and dispossession of local peasantry.

In this context, certain international initiatives may exacerbate the situation. Liberalisation, synonymous with asymmetrical trade, is being implemented through free trade agreements (such as the Mercosur-EU agreement) that increasingly reduce customs barriers for primary products. This encourages intensive monoculture (soya, maize) and, as a result, the expansion of production units at the expense of family farming. Legal certainty is established only for the benefit of capital. Regional harmonisation of standards often favours the protection of domestic and foreign financial investments rather than the territorial rights of indigenous communities. This facilitates the “legal” transfer of land to capitalist actors. These rules confine developing countries to a primary production economy. They focus regional integration on the export of raw commodities to the detriment of diversification, processing capacity and the freedom of food choices for each people.

Instead of serving as a shield against the voracity of the global market, regional integration often becomes a legal infrastructure that paves the way for the financialisation of land and the consolidation of a neocolonial model.

This trend is accompanied by an increase in deadly armed wars of conquest that devastate populations (Israel's invasion of Gaza and the West Bank, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, etc.) and

threats of annexation (the United States' annexation of Greenland, etc.). This sad reality calls urgently for multilateral instruments to enforce common rules that can guarantee dignified living conditions for all and the peaceful coexistence of populations, rather than the strengthening of nationalism and the law of the strongest.

## Giving up is not an option

Giving up is not an option. We, the members of the Steering Committee of the Forum for the Struggle for Land and Natural Resources, have decided to contribute to the alliance of all those who understand the scale of the changes that are needed, but who are still too few in number on the scale of the world's population, half of which is now urbanised. Coordinating all these forces is in our opinion, necessary to bring attention to the big issues and their solutions to the greatest number of people. This is the only way to gain the political weight necessary to see them implemented. We also want to participate in the evolution of social relations and laws at national and community levels, toward gender equality.

This first position paper for ICARRD+20 aims to outline the most urgent measures that governments must take to address the main problem, which is land grabbing by a small number of powerful economic and political actors. The trend towards concentration of land rights over recent decades, often the result of historical colonisation, has led, according to the report on the state of land tenure produced by the FAO Land Tenure Office, to a situation where 10% of land rights holders now control 90% of the world's cultivated land. This injustice, with its catastrophic human and ecological consequences, must end.

However, while this concentration is sometimes the result of illegal acts (unauthorised sales or concessions of land rights, land grabbing through physical or psychological coercion, etc.), it most often stems from transfers that are "legal" under current national laws: concessions or commercial transactions that are unregulated or insufficiently regulated. Legal frameworks give the greatest latitude to acquire land and expand to the wealthiest individuals and companies or those most able to borrow capital. This is particularly the case in the property and land rental markets and in the markets for shares in agricultural and forestry companies, which reserve access to agricultural land, forestry and fishing rights for the most privileged. This concentration is not solely the result of the most powerful economic actors and large-scale projects. It is also, to a very large extent (and probably in the majority of cases), the result of the gradual, quiet expansion of medium-sized production units that absorb their neighbours. It is vitally important for humanity to halt and reverse this global trend.

## Recommendations

*NOTA BENE: The term 'usage rights' is used here to refer indiscriminately to usage rights held in ownership, usage rights delegated on a temporary basis (rental, sharecropping, loan, etc.) and inalienable usage rights allocated and redistributed according to specific community rules.*

To halt land concentration that eliminates small-scale farming and traditional communities, it is necessary to:

1. **establish, at local and national level, mechanisms for distributing rights to use agricultural and forest ecosystems**, and fishing rights, and regulate land markets where they exist, based on:
  - an **obligation to provide information on intentions to transfer usage rights**, in particular plans to lease or sell agricultural or forestry property or to transfer shares in agricultural companies;
  - **pre-established objective references and criteria of general interest** (in favour of the climate, biodiversity, health) to distinguish between projects and potential beneficiaries of transferred rights, and to direct land towards small-scale farming, where smallholders and agricultural workers manage their own production units;
  - **intervention bodies with the power to authorise or refuse transfers**,
  - **local and state democratic control over the decisions** of these bodies.
2. To **implement land redistribution** from large estates owned by wealthy landowners or large companies on behalf of fairness and the greater contribution of land-deprived populations to food production, the fight against biodiversity erosion and climate change, with a focus on agroecological practices.
3. To **establish effective legal remedies, above the level of individual states, to restore the rights of individuals and groups who have been dispossessed** (rights to land and natural resources enshrined in the ICESCR<sup>2</sup>, ILO Convention 169<sup>3</sup>, UNDROP<sup>4</sup>, etc.):
  - Creation of a **supranational court with compulsory jurisdiction** to punish violations of fundamental international human rights law (IHRL),
  - **Integration of IHRL standards with higher hierarchical value into the standards guaranteed by investment and trade dispute settlement bodies** (trade agreements, including agricultural agreements and investment agreements).

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2 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

3 169 Convention relating to indigenous and tribal peoples of the International Labour Organisation.

4 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.

**4. End, at the international and national levels, the privileges<sup>5</sup> enjoyed by foreign direct investment in agriculture**, namely: tax exemptions (and legal exemptions in general, particularly with regard to labour law standards), clauses known as i. most-favoured-nation clause<sup>6</sup> and ii. protection against expropriation without compensation<sup>7</sup>, national agencies promoting investment in the agricultural, forestry and mining sectors and land banks that distribute land to economic agents operating under the capitalist model, large-scale concessions and subsidised loans/grants to these same actors, etc.

**5. To halt plans for exclusive individual land titling and the marketing of the titles thus produced**, which is the general cause of their concentration, and to evaluate less costly alternatives for formalising land use rights that can be controlled by local populations, updated at minimal cost, and better suited to the agreements and wishes of farmers, artisanal fishers and forest communities;

Where these land titling projects have been completed, establish transfer regulation bodies to prevent land accumulation and ensure the preservation of a network of smallholder, family-based agroecological production units (see point 1).

**6. Secure smallholder farming and pastoral livestock farming, artisanal fishing and forestry communities where necessary through appropriate formalisation of their rights to land and natural resources** (rather than through individual titling programmes and the opening up of land markets). (see point 1)

**7. Pool financial resources at the global level to supplement the budgets needed to implement national public policies that promote the recognition and protection of the rights of farmers, artisanal fishers and forest communities.**

These structural policies must be accompanied by:

- **a reform of international agricultural product markets that protects family farming** (which is characterized by units run by agricultural workers, whose economic logic is to maximise value creation per unit of land and per worker, and which is sustainable, if only to enable the transfer of production units to future generations);
- **the implementation of policies for decent remuneration for agricultural work that take into account production costs, particularly those related to agroecological practices.**

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5 Privileges established under bilateral and multilateral investment agreements and national investment codes.

6 Which stipulates that a new investor may not be subject to a tax and legal regime that is less favourable than the most favourable regime granted to one or more investors already established in the host country.

7 This provides for the obligation of the host country of the investment to compensate any investor who suffers expropriation, defined in a very broad sense, i.e. not only land expropriation but also other types of interference with the proper conduct of its business (e.g. road blockades by demonstrators hindering the proper functioning of the company's activities).