

AGST Newsletter – March 2017

Global Land Grabbing and Agribusiness Now – Africa, Latin America, Asia and Japan –

Nearly one year after the first symposium organised under the auspices of two research projects of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) on land grabbing and food security issues, on Wednesday, 22 February 2017, a seminar entitled “Global Land Grabbing and Agribusiness Now - Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Japan” was hosted by the AGST-project with the guest speaker Mr Devlin Kuyek of GRAIN.

Recalling the background of the last year event, the first symposium was facilitated by the collaboration between the project led by Professor Tadasu Tsuruta, Faculty of Agriculture, Kindai University on “Food security and Land grabbing in Semi-arid Africa” and the project led by Professor Shuji Hisano, Graduate School of Economics, Kyoto University and Professor Koichi Ikegami, Faculty of Agriculture, Kindai University on “an international comparative study on foreign agricultural investment and the responsibility of investing countries under the restructuring of agro-food regime”. This cooperation has made possible the invitation of leading scholars on the land grabbing topic such as Professor Jun Borrás of the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam; Professor Andreas Neef, University of Auckland, and professor Fons Coomans, Faculty of Law of the University of Maastricht – to discuss and exchanges with Japanese scholars. The aim of the symposium was also to promote research and viewpoints from the Far-East which, in the previous years, was less dynamic.

Apart from these two research projects, the seminar of this year was made possible with the support

of other engaged scholars and entities such as Dr Sayaka Funada-Classen, International Peace Research Institute, Meiji Gakuin University; The Japan Fund for Global Environment and the Social Science and Humanities Unit of the Top Global course under the Japan Gateway Kyoto University Top Global Programme, AGST.

As for the choice of the speaker, GRAIN, the home institution of Mr Devlin Kuyek, is a Barcelona-based small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-based and biodiversity based food systems. This organisation, although small in size, has tremendously contributed in documenting cases of land grabbing all across the world and its work has been recognised in the academic world over the past years.

The objective of the seminar was three-fold: to discuss the latest trend of land grabbing caused by agribusiness corporations, highlighting the issues about producing vegetable oil crops, oil palm, and soy; (ii) to hear about the impacts of these on-going projects on local communities in Africa (Gabon, Tanzania, Mozambique), Latin America (Brazil), and



Asia; and (iii) the involvement of and implications for Japan in general, and the Japanese corporations in particular.

Seminar Highlights

In his keynote speech, Mr Devlin Kuyek highlighted two main points on the recent development in land deals: 1) most of the projects have failed and 2) there is an expansion of the frontier for agribusiness.

“Most of the land deals have failed ... But they are quickly emulated in other countries ...” On the basis of GRAIN's activities, Mr Kuyek pointed out that most land transactions were cancelled, however, new projects have been emulated in other countries at an unprecedented pace and in other forms. Additionally, he stressed that the main objectives under the umbrella of agro-business expansion are characterised by the following features:

- ✓ The supports of host states given to companies;
- ✓ Projects are conducted in areas where the agricultural potential is very high and where infrastructures such as roads and ports do exist or under construction;
- ✓ Companies are pursuing vertical integration with the support of local elites.

“Agro-food industries are moving to new frontiers.” This shift is increasingly reinforced by

the participation of various speculative entities such as the [pension funds](#), [development finance institutes](#), and the offshore investment funds – in the [financialization of food](#) and to the race to “Cheap food” via the mushrooming of supermarkets.

Mr Kuyek made a point about the opacity of the current speculative sphere: investing companies are very opaque. It is becoming more and more difficult to know who are behind the deals. At the same time, this kind of practice is encouraging corruption as well as political risk.

The impacts of these recent changes are of different kinds such as land conflicts, violent repression that often leads to human casualties, dispossession under many forms, loss of access to water, pollution, food insecurity, marginalisation of women, and corruption.

On the basis of the GRAIN [reports](#), Mr Kuyek shared some very damning facts about illegal land acquisitions. He mentioned, among other things, the case of 731 land conflicts in Indonesia between communities and palm oil producers; The case of the 16 land rights advocates killed per month in 2016 ([see the stories](#)).

In the case of Japanese companies, which

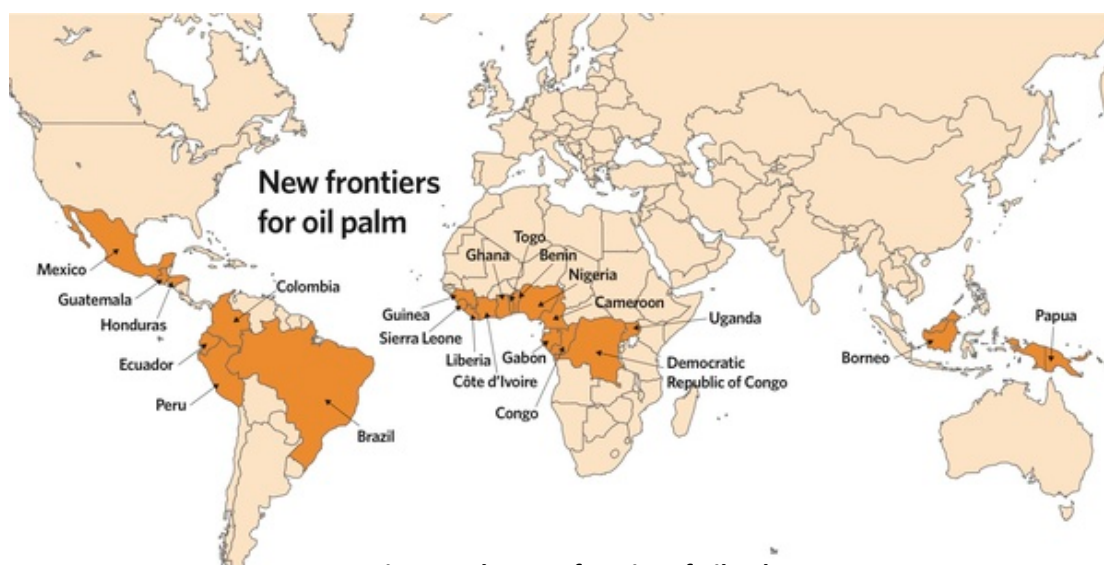


Figure 1 the new frontier of oil palm

Source: GRAIN (2014) New frontiers for oil palm. Retrieved from <https://www.grain.org/article/entries/5036-new-frontiers-for-oil-palm>

were of particular interest to the audience, the latter are very active in Brazil. The Japanese conglomerates (Zaibatsu) are gaining control of the Brazilian farmlands. Companies like Agrex do Brasil, an agribusiness industry owned by Mitsubishi Japan which has acquired 70000 hectares for the production of soybeans in 2013 in the states of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Goiás. SLC-MIT Empreendimentos Agrícolas S.A. owned by Mitsui & Co. Ltd, which operates 87000 hectares of land for maize, cotton and soybean. Contagalo General Grains SA and its subsidiary CGG Trading S.A. bought by Sojitz, a Japanese corporation, which own around 150,000 hectares of farmland where they produce grains and soybeans. Not only, did the Japanese companies purchase local companies but they also formed a joint venture and partnership with other big players such as the case of Sojitz and Indofood (Salim), Mitsubishi and Olam, and Itochu, CITIC and CP Group.

What is Being Done?

In the view of these events, resistance is organised as best it can. [Actions](#) are characterised by the formation of coalitions at the local, national and international levels. Corruption, illegitimate land grabbing, and illegal activities are exposed. Pressures on foreign governments and development funds are also exercised, supported by joint actions against companies. The foremost action and the long-term work are based on legislative and legal challenges.

Other areas of intervention also do exist such as the disclosure of new forms of land grabbing like the contract production, actions against the so-called “[responsible acquisition](#)” of land in which investors are the judges and parties. Other forms of action such as the denunciation of major development projects directly affecting



the vulnerable communities via repression, and co-optation and which are operated under the guise of major development institutions. And finally, the promotion of food sovereignty, which is built on a traditional and local food system.

Reactions

Professor Ikegami was invited to give his comments after Mr Kuyek's presentation. Being outraged by the potential interests of the Japanese government in the soybean industry, Professor Ikegami also shared his concern about the vested interest of former (retired) experts of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in the failure and success of the land grab projects. Also, it was pointed out that overseas governments are seeking to integrate small farmers into market mechanisms with a misconception that farmers are less productive.

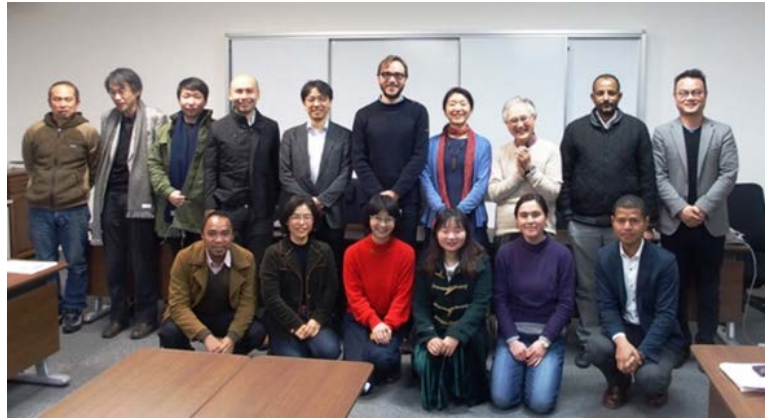
The second intervention was that of Dr Ralandison, newly appointed as Assistant Professor for the AGST project at the Graduate School of Economics, Kyoto University. Dr Ralandison underlined that there are major changes in the way of assessing land grabbing, which can no longer be reduced to the number of hectares. the size of new contracts is nowadays less than 10,000 hectares. Moreover, the ultimate goal of land use is no longer for export, but rather for the domestic market. Additionally, a new trend is emerging as part of land use,



Photo: (Left to the Right) Professor Ikegami and Dr Ralandison

which is diverted to produce basic products for the pharmaceutical industry. The last point underlined by Dr Ralandison was about the relationship between researchers and local communities. “Marginalised smallholder farmers are tired of researchers who constantly come to collect data but fail to bring some tangible changes”.

The ensuing discussions thus focused on the role of researchers while conducting activities within marginalised communities, particularly with regards the ‘human’ but also ‘moral’ behaviours.



For additional information about GRAIN’s activities, please visit the page <https://www.grain.org/>

3 March 2017
Haja M. Rajaonarison
AGST Research Fellow