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Land grabbing and its environmental justice implications

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Introduction

1.1 Introduction to land grabbing

Around 2008, non-governmental organizations, like Grain, and the global media started reporting on the increasing commodification of land to meet the demand for food and materials, a process that is also known as land grabbing (Edelman, 2013; Grain, 2008, 2016; Zoomers, 2010; Zoomers & Otsuki, 2017). Land grabbing was considered a new means to generate revenues and respond to the food and financial crisis that started around 2007-2008 (Borras, 2016; Zoomers, 2010). Even though some institutions merely see land grabbing as foreign driven, domestic players and local elites also play a central role (Margulis et al., 2014). Major concerns were expressed on the impact of land grabbing on local people and the environment (Grain, 2008; Cotula et al., 2009). The social impacts include displacement, further decline of opportunities for inclusion of local people and human rights violations (Alden Wily, 2011; van der Ploeg & Vanclay, 2017). A few of the environmental impacts are the loss of biodiversity, irreversible modification of ecosystems and water scarcity (Cotula et al., 2009; Johansson et al., 2016). Ten years later, in 2018, the global land grab is far from over (Grain, 2016; Li, 2017). We are dealing with a type of socio-political and economic reorganization of space that has not been witnessed before (Borras, 2016; Grain, 2016).

In 2016, Grain reported that their database on foreign land grabs contained 491 projects covering 30 million hectares across 78 countries (Grain, 2016). These are projects initiated after 2006 to produce food, and consist of land investments larger than 500 hectares.² To compare, from 2008 till 2012 the projects in the database quadrupled from 100 to 400 projects. From 2012 till 2016, Grain reported 91 new projects. This shows that land grabbing peaked in the period from 2008-2012. The projects in the Grain database do not include land grabbing for conservation purposes, (i.e. 'green grabs' (Fairhead et al., 2012)) or, for example, land grabbing for biofuels and large infrastructure (Zoomers, 2010).³ Thus, land in the hands of foreign owners caused by the land rush is probably higher than the numbers presented by Grain. As problematized by Edelman (2013), the

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1. Grain is a non-profit organization that supports small farmers and social movements in their struggles for land access and food sovereignty (www.grain.org).
 2. International organizations use different definitions for land grabbing. For the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) a land grab constitutes a deal of at least 1,000 hectares for a single deal while for Grain a land grab is a deal of 500 hectares and more. In contrast, scholars such as Borras et al. (2012a, p.404) stress the need to step away from using scale as a unit of analysis, since it misses or underemphasizes the underlying broader logic and operation of capital.
 3. The distinction between land and green grabbing is becoming increasingly vague due to the rise of 'flex crops' (Borras et al., 2016). Flex crops have multiple potential uses, including food, animal feed, biofuel, fibre, building materials, and derivative products (Borras et al., 2016; Kröger, 2016). Because flex crops operate simultaneously in different markets, green grabs can easily transform into land grabs, and the other way around. The rapid expansion of flex crops has led to increasing and competing demands for land.

numbers on land grabbing are 'messy'; over the years very different estimations have been made on the amount of hectares being grabbed (both sold and leased land), depending on the definition used. These estimations differed from 15 million to 227 million hectares being grabbed (Edelman, 2013). Edelman (2013), stressed the need for reliable data and approaches that go beyond the 'hectare-centred' focus. Rather than focusing on the numbers, it is important to understand the kinds of hectares being grabbed (e.g. areas of high biodiversity, fertility rates, water access, arid grassland) and the levels of capitalization (Borras et al., 2012a; Edelman, 2013).

What becomes clear from the data on land grabbing is that the increase in large land-based projects has slowed down over the years (see Grain, 2016 and the Land Matrix database). Also, whereas land grabbing used to be mainly concentrated in countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia, now, other countries such as Australia and Ukraine are included in the list (Grain, 2016; Wolford et al., 2013; Zoomers, 2010). Even though the pace at which land grabbing takes place is slowing down, resistance and conflict is rising worldwide over land access and the execution of these projects (Brent, 2015; Grain, 2016). Conflicts range from local people denouncing misconduct of (state-owned) companies, governments or elites, to intercommunity conflict and conflict between family members, as land grabbing involves clashing perspectives on land usage and ownership (Borras, 2016; Hall et al., 2015; Kansanga et al., 2018).

The presence of multiple actors taking control over land is triggered by the privatization of land and the global land market (Isakson, 2014; McMichael, 2012). The land market facilitates the process of land acquisition for global companies and other actors, leaving less opportunities for local people to maintain land access and formalize land tenure (McMichael, 2012). Rural communities often depend on land access for their livelihood but often do not possess formal land titles nor do they possess the financial means to formalize tenure (Zoomers, 2010). This is troublesome as the likelihood of land grabbing to occur increases when local people do not possess formal land title (Zoomers, 2010). As a consequence, local people are being displaced from the land they have been working and living on for years, are fenced-in or have their land access restricted (McMichael, 2012).

There are different drivers for land grabbing, including population growth, sustainability paradoxes, the efficiency argument, and the Western financial system (Borras, 2016; Zoomers, 2010). In general, land investors go to where the highest potential revenues can be obtained. Target countries therefore also shift (see the Land Matrix and Grain 2008, 2016). As highlighted by several scholars (Fairhead et al., 2012; Wolford et al., 2013), another driver for land grabbing is the idea that future scarcity can produce super-profits. This idea is considered a perverse capitalist drive justifying land grabbing, as money is made at the expense of local people. Another important driver that made way for land grabbing to occur was the estimation of the World Bank

that around 445 million hectares of land worldwide were uncultivated under-utilized, marginal and empty, that could be used for increasing food production (Borras, 2016; Kapstein, 2018). An outcome of this was that different actors started buying such lands to close the gap between demand and supply for food (Kapstein, 2018). Kapstein (2018) explained that this severely impacts local communities, since fertile land is seldom uncultivated but is instead used by local communities.

1.2 Overall aim and main research questions of this thesis

At the time of starting this PhD, in 2013, pressing topics were to analyse the impacts of land grabbing more rigorously, to understand the legal and political context in which land grabbing takes place, to explore the historical and political antecedents exacerbating the impact of land grabbing, and how agency and resistance shapes land grabbing dynamics (Edelman et al., 2013). These topics have shaped this PhD research.

Land grabbing can take many forms, can happen under different conditions, occurs in a variety of contexts, and has different implications (Edelman et al., 2013; Hall et al., 2015; Zoomers, 2010). To fully grasp crucial issues in land grabbing and its multi-scalar character, a focus on governance was chosen for this research (explained in greater detail in section 1.3). A focus on governance allows to explore the multi-scalar political context and dynamics in which land grabbing takes place. Also, it helps to understand which policies and practices lead to injustice and how affected communities resist (Cook & Swyngedouw, 2010).

Social, political and environmental dynamics (or a combination of these) influence the modes of land regulation and governance in the context of land grabbing. An important social dynamic is that people without formal land tenure suffer more from land grabbing than those that have full ownership of the land (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). In this respect, the contribution by Ribot & Peluso (2003) on access and ownership becomes relevant: land grabbing has a larger negative impact on people without formal land title yet it also restricts access to certain resources associated with land (water, for example) even for those that do have full ownership of the land. This means that in certain cases, people might be protected by their ownership of land, but still they may suffer from negative impacts of land grabbing as the access to certain resources can be modified. Therefore, people often experience combined social and environmental impacts. This also underlines that “the value of nature cannot be assessed only in economic terms” (Escobar, 2006, p.8), making it crucial to consider the socio-environmental impacts of land grabbing. An important political dynamic in the context of the governance of land grabbing is how policies and practices at multiple geographical levels influence land grabbing (Escobar, 2008; Peet et

al., 2011; Schlosberg, 2013). An important environmental dynamic is that many local communities that derive their livelihood from land are adversely impacted, as problematized in environmental justice literature (for more detail see section 1.3). Environmental justice problematized the unequal distribution of harms, and provides different topics to better understand the local impact of land grabbing, including the historical dynamics of marginalization. The dynamics discussed above shape the context in which land grabbing takes places.

Consequently, the main research questions that guide this research are:

‘What are the social, political and environmental dynamics underlying the contemporary governance of land grabbing?’ and ‘What are the implications of land grabbing in terms of environmental justice?’

These questions led to the following research aims: (1) to investigate the *socio-political* dynamics underlying the contemporary governance of land grabbing; (2) to investigate the *environmental* transformations underlying the contemporary governance of land grabbing, including the environmental impact of land grabbing at the local level; (3) to understand the environmental justice implications of land grabbing.

In order to answer these research questions and meet these aims, Argentina was chosen to understand the phenomenon of land grabbing. The past decade, Argentina has dealt with a large variety of land grabbing (see Borras et al., 2012a; Costantino, 2015; Murmis & Murmis, 2012). Specifically, two rural regions, the Provinces of Santiago del Estero and Corrientes, were chosen for this PhD research on land grabbing (see Figure 1). Santiago del Estero has experienced a massive expansion of industrial agriculture, especially soy, after the promulgation in 1996 of a national law allowing GMOs (Goldfarb & Zoomers, 2013). The shift in agricultural production trends has also led to a major increase in feedlotting and extensive livestock farming in this province (Jara & Paz, 2013). The Province of Corrientes faces important socio-environmental transformations resulting from the huge expansion of industrial tree plantations (Busscher et al., 2018). At the same time, Corrientes hosts the protected area ‘Los Esteros del Iberá’ where different land grabs are reported, including land grabbing for nature conservation (Busscher et al., 2018; Murmis & Murmis, 2012; Slutzky, 2014).

Land grabbing throughout Argentina has been particularly problematic for local communities and has led to much conflict over land use and concern about security of land tenure (Bidaseca et al., 2013). In the two provinces studied, many smallholders reside in situations of informal title or precarious land tenure (Goldfarb & van der Haar, 2016; Jara & Paz, 2013; Slutzky, 2014). Land grabbing severely disrupts the lives and livelihoods of local people and leads to the displace-



FIGURE 1. Map of Argentina, with Santiago del Estero and Corrientes highlighted. Source: Author

1.3 Theoretical framework and key concepts

To answer the research questions guiding this PhD, literature was selected that engages with issues of exclusion, socio-environmental transformations, and articulation among actors and institutions at different spatial scales. Power inequality is also a crucial dimension to understand land grabbing, as only some people suffer from the negative consequences of land grabbing and whereas other actors pro-actively stimulate and benefit from it (Hall et al., 2015; Zoomers, 2010). The disproportionate negative effect of land grabbing on certain people largely depends on class, status, age, gender, ethnicity and capabilities (Alden Wily, 2011; Escobar, 2006; Hall et al., 2015; Wolford et al., 2013). Moreover, these power inequalities are usually created in the past and are further reproduced in contemporary cases of land grabbing (Edelman et al., 2013). The impact of land grabbing sometimes triggers people to start protest actions ranging from passive resistance (i.e. weapons of the weak) (Scott, 1985) to overt action (Hanna et al., 2016), with the aim to simultaneously change reality and land governance. Bearing this in mind, political ecology, environmental justice and governance were chosen as central bodies of literature in this thesis, as discussed below (see Table 1).

Political ecology refers to the field of study that critically assesses the roles, interests and re-

sponsibilities of different actors while considering their power dynamics, at global, continental, national, regional and local levels. These actors “contribute to, are affected by, or seek to resolve environmental problems at different scales” (Bryant & Bailey, 1997, p.33). Thus, political ecology considers the broader socio-political dynamics to the analysis of local realities. One of the key objectives of political ecology research is to understand the politics over the environment and the implications of power inequality (Low & Gleeson, 1998). Literature on political ecology also stresses the importance of studying environmental change, as a way to advocate for better land governance and environmental use (Escobar, 2006; Peet et al., 2011). In the context of land grabbing, political ecology draws attention to the different roles, interests and responsibilities of different actors in land grabbing, and to the environmental degradation caused by land grabbing.

Environmental justice primarily focuses on the disproportionate environmental burden of land use activities on certain racial, vulnerable and marginalized groups (Bullard, 1996). As Low & Gleeson (1998, p.102) note, “environmental quality is a central aspect of wellbeing for individuals and communities, and it is therefore a critical question for justice.” Environmental justice claims tend to arise when: (i) the environment in which people live is irreversibly modified in its quality and use value; (ii) the access to common property resources is restricted; (iii) certain groups are not considered or do not benefit fairly; (iv) the capabilities of people are constrained because of land control and use changes (Bullard, 1996; Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). Core themes covered by the field of environmental justice include the unequal distribution of harms, the extent of participation in decision-making, procedural justice issues, and recognition of and respect for local people and local cultures (Agyeman et al., 2016; Bullard, 1996; Carruthers, 2008; Schlosberg, 2004, 2013; Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). In the context of land grabbing, the environmental justice scholarship helps to explore why and how certain vulnerable groups are negatively impacted by land grabbing, and the forms of resistance used by local communities and social movements.

Governance literature draws attention to the interaction of a diverse set of actors and institutions in the political and social arena. Governance is defined as a system of regulation involving the interactions between and within a variety of actors, such as local people, social movements/ NGOs, government officials and companies, across a variety of geographical scales and the socio-institutional arrangements they take part in (Agnew, 2013; Parra, 2010). The interactions between government, civil society and market actors at various levels, means a constant renegotiation, restructuring and readjustment of their roles, interests and responsibilities (Agnew, 2013; Corson & MacDonald, 2012; Parra & Moulaert, 2016; Swyngedouw, 2005). Thus, in this thesis, *the governance of land grabbing* is defined as the policies and practices exercised, at various spatial scales, by different actors and institutions to achieve their interest regarding land access and control, and land use practices. Throughout this research there is a specific interest in how land

governance materializes at the local level, influencing land governance at the local and other spatial scales. Specifically, governance literature facilitates to understand the power dynamics underlying land grabbing practices, as well as the strategies used by actors to promote their goals and agendas. This is important, as a wide range of actors in diverse institutional settings at different spatial levels are now influencing, mediating and negotiating land grabbing (Margulis et al., 2014; Parra & Moulaert, 2016).

Combining political ecology, environmental justice and governance adds value to the study of land grabbing in various ways. First, it brings on board an understanding of the power dimensions of different actors, including the role of the state in land grabbing (Zoomers, 2010). Second, it links broader multi-scalar socio-political dynamics of actors negotiating control over land. Third, synergy between land grabbing, political ecology, environmental justice and governance helps to identify in more detail the vulnerable groups that suffer the consequences of land grabbing. Finally, analysing land grabbing from an environmental justice perspective also strengthens the discussion on why land grabbing brings severe injustice. As discussed in Chapter 2, a combined political ecology and environmental justice lens provides a basis for a thicker socio-political framework to study the contemporary governance of land and land grabbing, including the drivers, mechanisms, consequences and processes from which (in)equality is reproduced.

TABLE 1. Overview of theoretical framework.

Scholarship	Focus	Strength	Weakness	Value added to studying the governance of land grabbing
Land Grabbing	Land in the hands of few	Addressing inequalities in access to land	Temporal dynamics of land grabbing are not sufficiently understood	-
	Displacement of local people			
	Land tenure insecurity for smallholders			
	Violence			
	Large-scale industrial production and large conservation projects			
Political Ecology	Local struggles linked to global issues	Multi-scalar analysis	Ecological elements of environmental change are not sufficiently integrated	Power inequality
	Injustice in contemporary commodity chains	Identifying the interests of different stakeholders		Analysing multiple actors from the local to the global
	Why, how and by whom environmental control occurs			
	The roles and power dynamics used by different actors			
	Environmental concern			
Environmental Justice	Unequal distribution of resource use and control	Focus on local inequalities and vulnerabilities	Little focus on place-based specificities and pre-existing injustice	Identifying vulnerable groups
	Identification of vulnerable groups experiencing excessive social and environmental harm	Protest, resistance, social transformations	Positive outcomes of protest and resistance are not sufficiently addressed	Identifying the factors that create and reproduce instances of injustice
	Resistance and the local agency introducing governance changes			
Governance	Understanding how actors (re)negotiate, restructure and readjust their roles, interests and responsibilities in response to other actors	Focus on power hierarchies and participation in spaces of decision-making	Limited focus on how past policies and practices shape current governance dynamics	Understanding the power dynamics between actors, including those operating at different spatial scales and collaborative governance

1.4 The contribution of this research

This PhD research offers several academic contributions. The theoretical chapter of this thesis (Chapter 2) starts by acknowledging the lack of methodological clarity on how to study land grabbing. By drawing synergies between political ecology and environmental justice, this chapter elaborates on five analytical elements for the study of land grabbing and its governance: (i) past and present policies and practices enabling unequal land ownership and access, (ii) the relationship between social and environmental expressions and visa-versa, (iii) geographical scales and multi-scalar analysis, (iv) temporal dimensions, and (v) context and diversity.

Further contributions, resulting from the empirical research material produced in this research, are the analyses of land grabbing in a protected area. As discussed in Chapter 3, land grabbing in protected areas can have severe understudied social impacts. So far, spaces for biodiversity conservation have not received sufficient attention in land grabbing research, in spite of the specificities of land grabbing in protected areas.

The analyses of land grabbing from an environmental justice perspective is another contribution of this PhD research (Chapter 4). This research gives an account of how land grabbing not only leads to actual violence, but constitutes a form of 'slow violence' for local people (Nixon, 2011), resulting from the lack of consideration by the government of the long term issues and cumulative impacts of land grabbing (see Chapter 4).

Additional research contributions are given to the literature of environmental justice with an analysis on the conditions that hinder local communities to resist to injustice (Chapter 4). It considers how pre-existing inequalities hamper local people to pro-actively address injustice brought by land grabbing. Chapter 4 also discusses why local people in some cases tacitly accept injustice instead of getting organised in a pro-active way.

This research also contributes to the literature on state-civil society collaborations in the context of land grabbing. Chapter 5 zooms in on a collaboration between the provincial government of Santiago del Estero and social movements. Years of political pressure have led to the establishment of two agencies to assist local communities in land tenure formalization as well as in (violent) conflicts over land. Even though there are limitations identified in the strengths of such agencies, it is argued that local communities would have been worse off without this type of collaboration.

Finally, the methodological approach of this research provides an in-depth understanding of the local governance implications of land grabbing, by including the perspectives of different actors

such as local people, social movements representatives, NGOs employees, government officials and company staff.

1.5 Research approach and methodology

This research is the result of four fieldwork visits to Argentina, totalling 10 months of fieldwork carried out between 2011 and 2016. For this research, I focused on two provinces more in-depth, namely Corrientes and Santiago del Estero (see Figure 1). Central to the fieldwork was understanding (i) the impacts of land grabbing on the lives of local people; (ii) the roles, interests and responsibilities of different actors; (iii) the difficulties in addressing the negative impacts from land grabbing; and (iv) how resistance strategies were mobilized at different geographical scales in an attempt to influence land grabbing. An extensive literature review was done to understand what drives land grabbing and why land grabbing and its governance creates injustice (Chapter 2). For the empirical research part of this thesis, land grabbing was studied in different localities and from complementary perspectives, as depicted in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Overview of the case studies and their location in this thesis.

Focus	Case study	Discussed in chapter
Land grabbing in a protected area	Conservation program of Douglas Tompkins in 'Los Esteros del Iberá' in Corrientes	3
	Investment of the Harvard Management Company in 'Los Esteros del Iberá' in Corrientes	
Environmental justice implications of land grabbing	Industrial tree plantation expansion in the province of Corrientes	4
	Agricultural expansion in the province of Santiago del Estero	
State-civil society collaborations in the context of land grabbing	<i>El Registro de Poseedores</i> and <i>El Comité de Emergencia</i> in Santiago del Estero	5

During the research, a multi-methods approach was adopted, with a wide range of social research methods used, including: document analysis, analysis of media reports, in-depth interviews and participant observation with field visits and attendance at village meetings where land use issues and land tenure were discussed. A total of 70 in-depth interviews were carried out, including 12 interviews with local residents, 16 with representatives of social movements/NGOs, 13 with representatives of companies, 13 with other researchers and journalists studying

land grabbing, and 16 interviews with government officials (including interviews with government officials from *El Registro de Poseedores* and *El Comité de Emergencia*). I conducted all these interviews in Spanish, and in a few of them this was done in collaboration with Constanza Parra. An example of an interview guide is given in Appendix I (in Spanish). Depending on the expertise of the interviewee, the interview guide was adjusted.

Informed consent was given for the interviews, although usually in an oral way (Vanclay et al., 2013). The informed consent form was prepared in Spanish (see Appendix II). Ethical approval for conducting this research was provided by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Only about half of the interviews could be recorded because of people's concerns about this. Nevertheless, interview notes were taken during interviews. The interviews that were recorded were transcribed. After each interview, especially for those that were not recorded, additional notes were made regarding any significant observation or comments made. In some interviews, participants presented photos, documents or other materials. Where appropriate, I took copies of these (see pictures 1 and 2). Also, where appropriate, I took photographs during field visits.



PICTURE 1. This picture (picture of a picture) was taken while interviewing a family that has been living in Corrientes for decades. Their house has been slowly enclosed by industrial tree plantations. The picture depicts the situation of the pond around 30 years ago when children were playing in the water body (picture taken by the author in 2015).



PICTURE 2. The same water body pictured in 2015. According to the interviewee, the water body had severely diminished size in the face of industrial tree plantations expansion in the area (picture taken by the author in 2015).

Several specific activities helped me to understand the complexity of land grabbing in Argentina. As part of my Master thesis in 2011, fieldwork was conducted with the assistance of a local NGO in Santiago del Estero. This collaboration has been very valuable in understanding the institutional context of Santiago del Estero, for network building and understanding the legal issues pertaining to land grabbing. Being in Santiago del Estero in this period also gave a good understanding of the violence that is mobilised by investors to gain land control. At this time, Cristian Ferreyra was killed when he was defending his land and protecting his community from being expelled. A demonstration was held right after this had happened (see pictures 3-5) and also a meeting of the 'Mesa Provincial de Tierra' (Provincial Roundtable for Land Issues - a formal mechanism that gathers together different actors involved in land use conflicts) (see Chapter 5) was attended where community members of Cristian Ferreyra were present to discuss the killing of Cristian, as well as the violence their community had experienced. This demonstration and meeting were of great tension.



PICTURE 3. Protest action in 2011. On the banner people ask for one minute of silence in respect of the people that died as a cause of the agricultural expansion in Santiago del Estero (picture taken by the author in 2011).



PICTURE 4. Protest action Greenpeace 'Stop deforestation stop evictions' (picture taken by the author in 2011).



PICTURE 5. Demonstrators in front of Dirección de Bosques (i.e. Directorate of Forests). This institute approved deforestation on the plot of land where Cristian Ferreyra was living. This instance instigated violence and the intend to evict the community (picture taken by the author in 2011).

Other activities included field visits to soy and tree plantations accompanied by owners or other key actors. Also, the conservation project of Douglas Tompkins and the tree plantations of Harvard Management Company (HMC) were visited accompanied by staff members (see pictures 6 and 7). Also, the manager of HMCs plantations was interviewed. Another way of gathering information was attending community meetings organized by NGOs. Often a lawyer would inform people about their land rights and mapping activities were organized (see pictures 8 and 9). All research activities contributed to gaining an integrated view of the implications of land grabbing and the local realities surrounding this. To grasp the temporal dynamics of land grabbing, one community was visited several times, in different points in time (2011 and 2016). Additional to the activities described, supportive information was gained from fieldtrips to other provinces like Misiones, Buenos Aires, Rosario, Jujuy, Santa Fe, Córdoba and Tucumán.



PICTURE 6. One of HMCs tree plantations in Los Esteros del Iberá, Corrientes (picture taken by the author in 2015).



PICTURE 7. The protected area Los Esteros del Iberá, Corrientes (pictures taken by the author in 2015).



PICTURE 8. Community meeting in Santiago del Estero with the aim to inform people about their land rights (picture taken by the author in 2011).



PICTURE 9. Capacity building activities in a community (mapping the land) (picture taken by the author in 2011).

The data for analysis comprised the interview transcripts, relevant documents, and field notes. Analysis of the data was done by reviewing all materials many times over and distilling the key issues relating to land grabbing. A limitation of this research is that it was only possible to visit communities that had external connections, as typically a gatekeeper, such as various NGO employees, introduced me to these communities. This may have influenced the findings, because the research mainly concerns communities that are reasonably well-connected and well-functioning. Other limitations related to language nuance, given the strong regional dialects in some of the rural villages. Statements about specific facts, events or happenings were cross-checked or triangulated as much as possible.

1.6 Positionality

This section considers my positionality as a researcher and how this influenced the research. As generally accepted, the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background and other features such as gender, race, class, socio-economic status, and educational background may affect the research process, especially in cross-cultural research and when studying the experience of people in vulnerable situations (Baud, 2002; Bourke, 2014; Clifford et al., 2010). Researchers that study a foreign context, carry with them their own culture, and empathize and identify with certain situations in the research process (Baud, 2002; Clifford et al., 2010). Aside from being a researcher, researchers are persons with moral compasses that are not easily 'switched off'. In line with this, Jara et al. (2016) expressed how difficult (or perhaps impossible) it is to produce objective science when working with vulnerable people that are affected by land grabbing, as you easily feel involved in their situation. Bourke (2014) coincides with Jara et al. (2016) and mentioned that the belief of producing something such as objective science is naïve or impossible, as values and worldviews are inherent and cannot be separated from who is researching.

Drawing on Bourke (2014), this section continues by discussing the following questions: (i) What role did my positionality - as a European, high-educated woman studying land grabbing and issues of vulnerability - play? (ii) How did my positionality help me in different spaces? (iii) How did my positionality influence my interactions with various actors in Argentina? The answers to these questions are not near to being final or conclusive. As many scholars on research positionality conclude, self-reflexivity is a non-conclusive and ongoing process (Bourke, 2014).

My own experience while doing research and approaching local people, company staff and government officials has been quite positive and constructive. I did not experience many boundaries in approaching people and having them participate in this research. The fact that I am not from Argentina opened important doors for me. In general, people were very curious about

what a foreigner was doing in their provinces, especially in Corrientes and Santiago del Estero that do not receive many tourists and foreign researchers. Also, NGO staff was happy to take me to local communities. Moreover, I had the impression that even tree plantation managers, conservation managers and soy farmers were pleased to show me their activities, and share their story. As an outsider, it is more acceptable to ask certain question that 'insiders' can't because they are either supposed to know the answer or they do not dare to ask (see Bourke (2014) for a discussion on the insider/outsider perspective). However, as an outsider, it was not always possible for me to fully understand the local language and expressions, which might have led to certain misunderstandings, incomplete information and insufficient nuance in the interpretation of collected information.

One of the challenges of this research was to interview and talk to a wide variety of people. In certain conversations with company staff, it was difficult to keep neutral and not to speak up for the communities that had shared their struggles with me. Another issue was the blurred boundary between my role as researcher and 'myself'. Once, I went to an event in the weekend for leisure and I met somebody with whom I discussed my research and the issues local people encountered with the arrival of large-scale land owners cultivating soy. This person then introduced me to somebody that happened to own 10,000 hectares, where he cultivated soy. He informed this person about my concerns. As a result, the large-scale land owner was aware of some of my findings, possibly influencing my research, as I visited his farm and interviewed him a few weeks later. Even though this visit has been highly interesting, this encounter reflects the difficulty of how to present yourself and live for a few months in a foreign country, including the limitations that one might have to disclose research findings.

Another issue in research positionality is the critical line as of which the researcher, investigating vulnerable people, should start engaging instead of studying, interviewing and merely taking notes. During my fieldwork research, I visited a family that was highly exposed to the negative impacts from agrochemical use in their vicinities. The purpose of my visit was to carry out an in-depth research to better understand their situation and struggles studied for this PhD. However, the difficult conditions experienced by this family couldn't prevent me from wanting to discuss the possible alternatives on how to deal with the issues they faced. At the end, I decided not to intervene. Instead, I asked the NGO personnel I was with to address these issues in their next visit. The question of the boundary between carrying out research for a PhD and intervening was a challenging one.

A final ethical consideration regards the role of researchers. As discussed by panellist An Ansons during the LandAc conference 'Land governance and (in) mobility' (Utrecht, July 2018), there are many ethical challenges inherent to research on land grabbing and the consequent

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knowledge production. Specifically, she reflected on the legitimacy of making a career out of studying very vulnerable people. She raised the issue whether researchers have an obligation to go beyond knowledge production. We assume that we give people a voice by studying their struggles, but we do not acknowledge enough that the information we gather may be used by powerful actors too, possibly entailing negative consequences. I believe this ethical consideration deserves higher attention among the academic community.

1.7 Outline of the thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters, including this general introduction. The four papers written as part of this PhD research guide the structure of this thesis.

Chapter two explores how and why land grabbing occurs, and offers a framework to analyse the governance of land grabbing from a combined political ecology and environmental justice perspective. This chapter stresses that the examination of land grabbing that is inflected by political ecology and environmental justice frames can allow for a better comprehension of the multi- and interscalar mechanisms, and the processes and practices that lead to inequality. This chapter also discusses the socio-political and socio-economic drivers triggering land grabbing and pays special attention to how and why land grabbing creates social and environmental injustice. Building on political ecology and environmental justice literature, the following key elements for the study of the governance of land grabbing were identified in this chapter: (i) past and present policies and practices enabling unequal land ownership and access, (ii) the relationship between social and environmental expressions and *visa-versa*, (iii) geographical scales and multi-scalar analysis, (iv) temporal dimensions, and (v) context and diversity.

Chapter three discusses land grabbing in a protected area in Argentina: Los Esteros del Iberá in Corrientes. Protected areas are increasingly prone to land grabbing under the reign of neoliberal ideas on conserving nature (Busscher et al., 2018). There is a specific focus on two projects in and around Los Esteros del Iberá, namely the investment of Harvard Management Company for developing industrial tree plantations and the conservation initiative of Douglas Tompkins/ Conservation Land Trust. The local implications of these two projects are discussed, as well as the governance implications of land grabbing in protected areas. In this chapter it is suggested that the multi-level governance character of land grabbing in protected areas leads to negative outcomes but potentially also positive developments can be distinguished. However, even though some positive features were distinguished in the case studies, this chapter highlights that the needs, interests and demands of communities are never fully considered in land grabbing practices, not even when social movements from multiple scales assist local people

affected by land grabbing.

Chapter four discusses the environmental justice implications of land grabbing. Environmental justice literature is used to analyse the issues arising from industrial tree plantations in Corrientes and the agricultural expansion in Santiago del Estero. In this chapter different shortcomings are identified with respect to environmental justice literature, including the lack of understanding of the preconditions necessary to initiate social transformative action. Furthermore, this chapter explores the factors that enable or constrain people to seek resolution of their environmental justice issues. Environmental justice too easily assumes that people will resist when experiencing injustice. That is not the case in the provinces studied. In the context of land grabbing, local people would address other injustices experienced rather than for example proactively formalizing land tenure. These injustices are a result of historical marginalization of rural areas in Argentina. This chapter underlines the need to recognize informal and customary land use and the need to support social movements in their actions for creating a more equal society.

Chapter five analyses the governance implications of land grabbing in Santiago del Estero. It specifically focuses on the institutional setting of the province and the role of social movements. It shows how *Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero* (Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero) (MOCASE) and other social movements influence the debate of land tenure insecurity. With MOCASE as the leading actor, the provincial government was pressured to better address the violent situation in the province. After decades of struggles, social movements reached an agreement with the provincial government to set up two agencies that address land grabbing issues, namely, *el Registro de Poseedores* and *el Comité de Emergencia*. In this chapter an overview of the incentives for, limitations of, and contradictions to these type of collaborations is presented. These types of local collaborations are not so often studied, nor are their programs well analysed. Additionally, an extensive explanation is given on the legal context in which land grabbing takes place in Argentina.

In the final chapter of this thesis, the main research findings are summarized and a reflection is given on the theoretical framework used in this thesis. In this reflection, several points are identified that are important to consider for an improved understanding of land grabbing. Subsequently, a more nuanced description of land grabbing is given. Moreover, some concluding comments are given on the different industries studied; industrial tree plantations, nature conservation and agriculture. This chapter also provides an analysis of recent political developments in Argentina and Latin America. These political changes possibly influence land grabbing and environmental justice dynamics in the future. Finally, recommendations are given for different actors based on the findings of this thesis. Specifically, recommendations are given for local communities, social movements/NGOs, governments, international organisations, and for companies engaged in ac-

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tivities that might be perceived as land grabbing. Lastly, this chapter offers some final remarks on the research and directions for further research. Special attention is given to the importance of redressing inequality and actively addressing the issues communities face in academic research.

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