



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nodes of resistance to green grabbing: a political ecology

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Abstract: Green grabbing is the privatization or appropriation of land for purposes of advancing a “green” economy while excluding local, indigenous people from natural resources. This is a problem of global scale that has arisen mainly during a historical period when free market, neo-liberal policies have dominated the world economy. The academic literature on the subject rarely mentions resistance to green grabbing, nor are there many efforts to critically and systematically examine the social dynamics of this process. We consider both what works and what fails during the process of opposition, as well as the social psychology of risk taking among both green grabbers and opponents. The paper concludes with a way forward proffering the resistance.

Keywords: green grabbing, privatization, social psychology

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1. Introduction

Green grabbing is the privatization or appropriation of land for purposes of advancing a “green” economy while excluding local, indigenous people from natural resources. The growing literature on the subject suggests that this is a problem of global scale that has mainly arisen during a historical period when free market, neo-liberal policies have dominated the world economy (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones, 2012; Corson, 2011, 2012; Corson and MacDonald, 2012; Wolford, 2010; Leach, Fairhead and Fraser, 2012; Cardenas, 2012; Benjaminsin and Bryceson, 2012; Gardner, 2012; Nalepa and Bauer, 2012; Neimark, 2012; Seagle, 2012; Ybarra, 2012; Snijders, 2012; McCarthy, Vel and Afiff, 2012; Tienhaara, 2012; Baletti, 2012; Filer, 2012; Kelly, 2011; Nelson, 2010; Dressler *et al.*, 2010; Goldman, 2011; Castree, 2008, 2010). A neoliberal view of the environment prescribes the commoditization of nearly all aspects of the natural environment — essentially ren-

dering nature for sale — along with the new institutions and relationships that have accompanied this transition toward laissez-faire economics and politics (Buchler and Dressler, 2012; Leach, 2012). The lack of governmental involvement in the economy and in the environment has opened space for a dynamic, complex sociocultural process that involves state, corporate, nongovernmental and local actors engaging in the perpetration of or resistance to green grabbing, at times interrelating in unexpected ways (Fletcher, 2010; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Grandia, 2007). Powerful interests are emboldened due to lack of regulation to mobilize for purposes of accumulating land and other valuable assets while pursuing a green agenda that is purportedly advantageous to all stakeholders (Ojeda, 2012, 2013). During such processes, indigenous people may be expelled from their land against their will (Gardner, 2012; Patinkin, 2013; Grajales, 2011; Borra *et al.*, 2011; Ojeda, 2012) or forced to become isolated, poorly paid manual laborers for corporate owners.

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Thus, green grabs harm people as well as the entire dynamics of ecosystems (McAfee, 2011; Sullivan, 2009a, 2009b), and due to their complexities can be viewed as a social process rather than a particular act (Peluso and Lund, 2011; Sikor and Lund, 2009). Green grabbing has adopted a standard language that occasionally papers over differences between traditionally opposed groups; thus, the perception may persist that resistance to green grabbing is muted, understated, or non-existent.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the nuanced ways in which the developing resistance to green grabbing has been carried out. The extant academic literature on the subject, in general, may mention opposition in passing but to date, there are few if any efforts to critically and systematically examine the social dynamics of this process. We consider both what works and what fails during the process of opposition, as well as the social psychology of risk taking among both green grabbers and opponents. A way forward proffering the resistance is included in the conclusion.

2. Political Ecology

This paper employs a perspective called political ecology that combines a concern for ecology along with the fundamental and critical concepts and methodologies of political economy. A central premise of this field of study is that political and economic institutions provide the proper backdrop with which to consider and analyze ecologies and how they change. Marxian economics stressed that the creation and perpetuation of economic-political structures in early capitalism lent an advantage to a propertied, elite class at the expense of workers alienated from the means of production and dispossessed of its ownership. A process of “primitive accumulation” was significant in the establishment of this kind of unequal system of capitalist social relations. Common property was abolished, and the commons were enclosed, thereby thinking of commons as land, people, social structures or ideas (Marx and Engels, 1967). David Harvey (2005) further contended that primitive accumulation may be thought of today as “accumulation by dispossession,” a continuing process of capital accumulation on a world scale (De Angelis, 2001). Given the Marxian concern with crisis, a political ecology of green grabbing would not be complete without some notion of praxis toward a better society. Robbins (2004, p.12)

wrote that political ecology has a “normative understanding that there are very likely better, less coercive, less exploitative, and more sustainable ways of doing things.”

Marxian political economy provided the initial primary theoretical influence for political ecology, but postmodernism and post-structural theories subsequently injected fresh ideas into the field. For instance, there was a developing concern with the dimension of widespread and dispersed power over customary users of natural resources; the idea that nuanced networked assemblages may work both to promote and resist green grabbing; and that a rhizomatic structure of relations may be present among both grabbers and resisters (Rocheleau, 2015; Foucault, 1991; Latour, 2007; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Given the fluidity of post-structuralist theory, land grabbing or green grabbing may defy definition or exploration by any of one of these lines of thought, and may be explained by processes that appear to be more nonlinear than linear.

Pearce and Warford (1993) argued that putting a monetary price on nature might well help to preserve it. However, doing so caught the attention of neo-liberals that saw privatization and commoditization of these resources as being essential to a careful stewardship of natural resources and more efficient than the idea of the commons. Hardin (1968), in a seminal work on the commons, parallels this view, re-conceptualizing public goods as scarce commodities that require either privatization or strong state control. Encouraged by opportunities to effect the “greening” of environments damaged by natural disasters (Klein, 2007), there emerged a belief that bettering the environment was good for business and that greening and profits could coexist with minimal conflicts.

Given this intellectually tolerant attitude toward pricing out ecosystems, the commoditization of the environment proceeded during the 1980s and 1990s, but it was the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment of 2005 that signaled the popularity of such practices, giving rise to an effort to try and assign prices to every natural service (Leach, 2012). What followed was the construction of payment schemes for various ecosystem services from biodiversity and agrofuels to carbon storage and aesthetic and tourism values. Opportunities for infrastructure development through the creation of special economic zones further fueled ecosystem sellouts (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones, 2012; Borrás and Franco, 2012; Levien, 2012; GRAIN, 2013). Consequently, since 2008, nations in the indu-

strialized north, China, and the Middle East found a renewed interest in investing in land and resources in low-income countries. That, according to Leach (2012), “has given rise to a phenomenon of land-grabbing in which large areas of land in the developing world are being parceled off for food and biofuels, often with very negative effects on land rights for the people who live there.”

Three important issues have led to an increase in the phenomenon of green grabbing. First, most of the governments selling off their ecosystem services were impoverished, desperate for money, and definitely in such a position as to be taken advantage of by green grabbers (Leach, 2012). Concurrently, more affluent nations were motivated to buy up land for outsourced food and biomass production after the dual crippling fiscal shocks of the 2008 financial and food crises (Blas and Wallis, 2009). The payment schemes were obscure and complicated, which made it extremely tough for governments or indigenous peoples without sophisticated technological knowledge to understand the implications and social costs of the signed contracts. Nonetheless, poorer nations were eager to sign away rights to their ecosystems in hopes of getting quick cash that might lead to economic development and prosperity.

Second, the agreements tended to be constructed and justified in such a way that there was an assumption that forests were being lost fast and that local people were to blame for it (Leach, 2012). Traditional, indigenous farming practices were viewed as something that stalled the arc of progress or got in the way of it. Peasants that fed the world for millennia were now being cast as backward, inefficient and obstacles to development. They may be branded as culturally inauthentic, or falsely accused as violent criminals (Rocheleau, 2015). Such perceptions fed a rebirth of some older philosophies about conservation that favored shutting people out of forest areas. The forest carbon schemes, in particular, appear to lock local residents out of forests because the carbon stocks have to stay put, and this precludes most human involvement with the forests. Thus, this is a new kind of colonization (Leach, 2012; Peluso and Lund, 2011; Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995). Small farms and village that thrived alongside nature are “now being replaced by a landscape of grabbed concessions and people, if they have any rights at all, are being reduced to laborers in ecosystems in which they no longer have any value” (Leach, 2012). The discursive element to this

argument is so convincing as to imply that such colonization is like a juggernaut of modernity (Giddens, 1990; Backhouse, 2014), a process that is inevitable.

Third, new actors and configurations entered into the accelerated quest for more green projects. For example, there was a mistaken tendency to assume that the most recent wave of green grabs that commenced after 2005 was simply an expansion of old contract farming models that had served well the likes of Dole, Unilever or other more traditional plantation or agribusiness companies (GRAIN, 2009). In reality, what happened was that the high-powered finance industry, with little to no experience in farming, emerged as a crucial corporate player. Speculative capital is in search for high returns after the housing bubble burst. This financial capital “is even more volatile, moves even faster and has even less relation to the land than productive capital of other industrial sectors” (Draitser, 2014). Further, some of the investment monies were coming from the Global South, thus disrupting the usual narrative of the exploitative relationship between North and South (Wallerstein, 1974).

Conceptually, land grabbing and green grabbing live in a socially constructed workspace where the two concepts are difficult to disentangle. Land grabbing became an important issue in the 2008 financial crisis as mid-level economies such as South Korea and Saudi Arabia sought to acquire large land holdings in the developing world — places like Ethiopia and Madagascar — amidst efforts to provide food security in an era of fear. The idea was picked up by international development groups which helped to reinforce this framing (Transnational Institute, 2012). Thus, it was logical to think that nearly all land grabs, as natural resources, could be construed as green grabs, especially when justified by such progressive concepts as food security and biodiversity. The grab is more likely to be perceived as a green grab, however, when the primary motive shifts to rent seeking ecosystem commoditization, as when lands are obtained and closed off to secure land to enhance profits while raising biofuels or to use the land for development of tourism. The grab may be initiated in and obscurely embedded within the complex technical language of national or transnational climate protection measures. Its distinctive character may also be reflective of the unusual new alliances developing among NGOs, the private sector, states, and development agencies, as well as by specific legitimating strategies. However, not all green grabs may include land; they may involve increasingly

complex technological items such as product certifications, satellite photos, GIS programs, and other electronic or administrative spaces which corporations may profit from that do not explicitly require land acquisition.

3. Nodes of Resistance to Green Grabbing

Several types of resistance can be identified and classified based on the kind of strategy that is used in the resisting process. The resistance options range from purposely minimal efforts to countermand the green grab, to active, forceful, multi-actor, discursively delegitimizing kinds of opposition. As nodes of resistance, these are not distinct types but rather action centers that are amenable to sharing of interests and bridge-building among groups, no matter how awkward the alliances may initially appear. NGOs are at the forefront of gathering and presenting data about resistance. Academics have been somewhat slow to synthesize, analyze and provide a broader social context for the data collected.

3.1 Transnational Activism

Organizations fought green grabs and land grabs by assisting small farmers and social movements in their struggles to maintain community control over biodiversity-based food systems. A Barcelona-based international nonprofit, GRAIN, is an example. It advocates for change favoring small farmers and indigenous farming practices. GRAIN brings resources to the table that locals may not possess: independent research and analysis; and alliance building — both very useful skill sets that connect socially marginalized farmers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to larger networks. Working with other socio-environmental justice movements and organizations around themes such as agrofuels, forestry, food sovereignty and climate justice, GRAIN has assisted in building up a transnational contentious discourse that has had a significant impact on the positions of international governance institutions concerned with agriculture, including the World Bank, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Food (Pye, 2010; Rosset and Martinez-Torres, 2005; Holifield, 2004; Castree, 2011).

GRAIN has successfully mobilized indigenous people and other locals, educating them on the dangers of green grabbing, and the effect of this practice on their communities. GRAIN supported the first international

peasants' conference in 2011 took place in Nyéléni, Mali. Over 250 peasants, pastoralists, indigenous peoples and their allies from 30 countries participated. The declaration they issued adopted an aggressively rights-based discourse and a strong environmental justice framing in defense of “food sovereignty, the commons and the rights of small-scale food providers to natural resources” (EJOLT, 2014, p.59). Framing the fight against land grabbing as a struggle against capitalism, neo-liberalism, and a destructive economic model, participants reiterated that they were not interested in “getting a better deal” but rather in a transformational project, a radical politics or “counter-hegemonic globalization.” In its March 2014 report, EJOLT noted that this was a stop and roll back approach (Borras and Franco, 2012; McMichael, 2012), as contrasted with a more moderate and cautious “ecological modernization” approach of some other groups (EJOLT, 2014, p.59).

Another organization called Nature Kenya played an aggressive role in preventing land and green grabbing in the Tana River Delta. The Delta is a patchwork of the Tana River plus palm savanna, seasonally flooded grassland, forest fragments, lakes, and mangroves. This sensitive ecosystem supports several communities as well as livestock, wildlife, and water birds. The people have adapted their lifestyle to seasonal extremes, cultivating on receding lake edges, seasonally fertile floodplains where the river spills fresh water into their field with the tidal flow. If undisturbed, this wetland acts like a sponge, absorbing food, storing water and remaining green during the dry season. When the delta floods, it fills with water making it an ideal setting for water birds and a place where Kenya's bird population is replenished (Nature Kenya, 2016). Agricultural schemes such as biofuel or sugar projects risk disrupting the sensitive water balance of the region, leaving the land and its people prone to the ravages of flood and drought and salt water intrusion.

In August, 2010 communities living in the Tana River Delta went to the High Court in Malindi seeking orders against all the planned agricultural projects in the Delta, including those of the Tana Integrated Sugar Project (which would purportedly lead to gains in employment, sugar production, ethanol and electric power, and infrastructure) and TARDA (Tana and Athi Rivers Development Authority), a project set up to grow rice and maize for national food. Nature Kenya

and the East African Wild Life Society paid lawyers, filing costs and other litigation costs related to the orders (EJOLT, 2014). Representing the communities were three farmers, three pastoralists, three fishermen and three conservationists. These locals were seeking the court to compel the companies to develop, in consultation with all stakeholders, a master plan for land use, development, livelihoods and ecological protection of the Delta. On February 4, 2013 the High Court in Nairobi ruled mostly in favor of the community petition, specifying the need for one agency to oversee the development of the Tana Delta; and TARDA was tasked with developing, with full participation of the community and other stakeholders, land use development plans for the projects that were to be carried out within 45 days of the ruling date. Additionally, Nature Kenya worked to secure Tana Delta's designation as a Ramsar site, which guaranteed its protection by an international treaty that conserves and sustains wetlands.

Nature Kenya also contributed to the blocking of several more green grabbing projects that were scheduled to start up concurrently with TISP and TARDA. G4 Industries abandoned their project while Bedford Biofuels cultivated only about one tenth of the 10,000 hectares set aside for *Jatropha*. Flow Energy Limited restricted its oil and gas exploration sites. Many project proponents cited investor shyness after becoming targets of environmental campaigns. This success cannot be underrated because the Delta has remained in a more or less intact state — a major win for biodiversity and communities (EJOLT, 2014). The best time of intervention, it appears, is before projects start; otherwise, it becomes difficult to stop the momentum of a project as it moves forward.

Other attempts at organizational resistance have met with success, but the methods to achieve victory were different. For example, the promotion of agrofuels as a green strategy has been controversial and subject to resistance in the form of organized protests (Backhouse, 2014). Protesters against green grabbing merged with some other social movements to help topple host governments or to convince governments to cancel projects. One corporate strategy to reduce criticism of agrofuels is to plant the crops for agrofuels in so-called degraded areas to prevent a shortage of foodstuffs or the deforestation of primary forests. A degraded area is one that has already sustained environmental damage. Placing an agrofuel project in such an area would serve as a way to prevent any further damage to the environment. The World Bank contends

that there are areas ripe for such a green strategy, estimating that the area of currently uncultivated, non-forested land that would be ecologically suitable for rainfed cultivation in sparsely populated areas at approximately 445 million hectares worldwide (Deininger *et al.*, 2011). In Brazil, the main cultivation areas are ones already deforested, preferably degraded grazing land in the Amazonian state of Para. These areas, however, can be the basis for livelihoods of peasants or traditional local communities.

According to Backhouse (2014), African palm was brought to Brazil by African slaves 400 years ago. It was introduced into the Amazon basin for the first time by researchers in 1942 and from the 1970s onward was promoted by the military dictatorship as part of its Amazon development policy. Between 2002 and 2006 at the federal state level, pilot projects were initiated in Para to integrate peasants into the palm oil sector using farming contracts. Comprehensive state support for the Brazilian palm oil sector did not begin until 2010, however, with the state program for sustainable palm oil production. In this program, the Brazilian government combined national energy and development policy goals. The labor intensive oil palm plantations were to create work and market access for small contract farms and in this way contribute to the development of impoverished rural regions. Contracts specified a guarantee to include peasant agriculture in the project. If enterprises commit themselves to buying 15 percent of their palm oil from the peasants, this part of the agreement will entitle them to special sales conditions on the national biodiesel market and free them from taxes. There was also an argument favoring the environment. The project, framed as a strategy of CO₂ avoidance through the prevention of deforestation and the agricultural use of already altered lands, is intended to contribute to Brazil's voluntary climate protection goals. Approximately 32 million hectares were zoned as suitable for oil palm planting, creating opportunities for green grabbing. On the ground, positions on the contracts varied. They were regarded either as a unique chance in the struggle against rural poverty or part of an expropriation strategy that would expel families and communities from their land. Some peasants wished unconditionally to take part in this product; others were hesitant; others were strictly opposed, involving themselves in associations and neighborhood groups against contract farming production.

Given this ambivalence toward resistance, by 2013,

no politically organized opposition to the state palm oil program had been formed (Backhouse, 2014). There were no political alliances formed between critical factions of the rural population, the trade unions, and social movements. No public hearings and no environmental impact statements were filed. In some places the conditions for political resistance do not exist: in some of the expansion areas, parts of the peasant population are socially so marginalized that they have neither places for political articulation nor state or civil society centers for dealing with their demands or complaints. Civil society actors hardly exist outside of the agricultural trade unions in the entire case study region. By the end of 2013, there was no consistent voice opposing the expansion, and some of the trade unionists spoke for it. The biggest issue was the way the program was pitched: it was without alternative and inevitable. As Backhouse (2014) concluded, only because it is widely accepted, from local to transnational political forms, that degraded areas should be developed agro-industrially for the protection of the tropical forest, can the local population's participation rights, and environmental laws, be circumvented by the large-scale extension of plantations, without causing transnational protest as in the case of other large projects in Amazonia.

In Malaysia, accounts of observers on the ground suggest that palm oil projects similar to the one in Brazil lead to the social precaritization of the workers as reflected in temporary employment, insecure and low wages, outsourcing and subcontracting, and a lack of political and social rights (Pye, 2015). The Malaysian project differed in that many of the workers recruited for labor in the project were immigrants from neighboring countries. Some of the workers from these projects tell horrific stories of debt bondage, violently enforced labor, political repression, and caning. However, other workers tell different stories, claiming to work according to collective agreements and indeed saving money which they invest in a house or a small holding back home. Thus, control of the state or the corporation over the plantation labor is far from complete, as was the case in Brazil.

Workers in Malaysia developed innovative resistance strategies that could be described occupying a middle ground between acquiescence and open revolt (Pye, 2015). Special export zones prevented labor organizations from developing, but workers found a way through "everyday resistance" to produce transnation-

al spaces of social reproduction. First, workers found means to permeate and neutralize Malaysia's borders. Hundreds of thousands of migrants actively challenged the Malaysian state's right to impose border controls and found ways of circumventing the official prescriptions and restrictions regarding permits, passports, health checks, and children. At times, this meant illegal entry, but also stealthier means were employed such as using multiple passports and entering legally under a different name or forging birth certificates to gain resident rights. A second strategy was to abscond to work in places that paid higher wages. Subterranean networks offered information on current pay rates, experiences of good and bad employers, and, in general, the information infrastructure needed to move around and secure employment elsewhere. Third, workers engaged in wildcat strikes. Empowered by the success of the first two strategies, workers were emboldened to try out more direct approaches to deal with poor employer practices. At one mill in Sabah, the Indonesian workforce went on strike when they did not receive a promised wage increase, the increase being allocated instead to office workers, most of whom were Malaysian citizens.

3.2 Networked Resistance

Networked resistance allows both previously existing and newly created networks in opposition to green grabs to combine their efforts to oppose a certain project. In many cases, the systems were not formed in opposition to green grabbing per se, but may have arisen from concerns about variegated social concerns and problems. Mexico provided a case where anti-green grab concerns merged with other groups in often unpredictable ways, causing some writers to bring up the metaphor of a rhizome, a rootstock from which roots form and coalesce in diverse ways to produce a healthy plant. Chiapas, Mexico was a place where such rhizomatic resistance developed. The state was characterized by an agricultural economy, low land values, low wages, and despite poverty, was rich in mineral, energy and forest resources, and scenic wonders, all of which became the targets of a host of actors from investors to conservation organizations, the tourism industry, mining interests, industrial agriculture giants and alternative energy developers (Rocheleau, 2015). Chiapas was singled out by former Mexican President Felipe Calderon, and the former Governor, Juan Sabines, as the place for a pilot project

for the regional development initiative formerly known as Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), now the Mesoamerica Project. The multi-lateral effort at regional integration committed Mexico, Central America, Colombia and the Dominican Republic to joint ventures by state and private capital, with significant U.S. participation. The initiative focused on transportation, telecommunications, and energy infrastructure, with much of the power destined for mining and manufacturing industries, as well as energy consumers in the U.S. Critics noted the neoliberal model of development and the potential harm to local communities and the environment. The critics insisted that the actual goals of the project were the privatization of land, including farmland, as well as water and public services, and the control of the region by foreign interests. Further, they argued that the Mesoamerica Project was destroying fragile rainforests and displacing indigenous people who have little voice in the project.

In 1994, a broad social movement coalesced around the struggle for land and territory, with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, and the related autonomous civilian communities preeminent among them. The Zapatistas timed their uprising on January 1, 1994, in direct response to the implementation of NAFTA on that date, and the related assaults on agrarian communities and communal property. Other groups resisting the counter-reforms and supporting recuperation of peasant and indigenous lands included Christian ecclesiastical base communities, the pacifist Catholic communities, peasant and indigenous associations, rural artisans' and farmers' unions, some directly and others indirectly allied with the Zapatistas, and some not at all. The Liberation Theology wing of the Catholic Church supported the land struggle with several thousand catechists who served as rural community organizers and human rights promoters. A Bishop in San Cristobal took a lead in convening peace negotiations between the government and the Zapatistas and in guaranteeing the safety of the latter. "A diverse array of national and international civil society organizations rapidly coalesced around these groups forming locally rooted and internationally networked solidarity movements, including religious, indigenous, peasant, feminist, human rights and, to some extent, environmental networks" (Rocheleau, 2015, p.699). These networks would later join in the fight against green grabbing.

The most relevant element of the Mesoamerica Project concerning green grabs in Chiapas is the Palen-

que Integrated Planned Center (hereafter CIPP), a combined conservation and tourism initiative originated in 2000 by President Vicente Fox. Although popular resistance initially delayed the project, it surfaced again as a flagship project of both President Calderon and Governor Sabines. CIPP was planned as a first rate inland tourism archipelago of archeological sites, pristine forest stands and scenic waterfalls and lakes, in a green sea of biodiversity conservation, carbon storage, and other environmentally sound practices. Various government officials further evoked visions of "Cancun in the rainforest" and "Disneyland in the rainforest" (Rocheleau, 2015, p.703). This profit seeking vision served to legitimate eviction of indigenous people by appealing to notions of environmental protection and public interest. The push to secure territorial reserves for the CIPP also facilitated the removal of oppositional communities from the vicinity of planned commercial and industrial development, under the twin pretexts of national and global nature conservation and tourism as a clean, green development mechanism. During this process, as another necessary prelude to dispossession is "the reclassification of indigenous and campesino groups and particular communities to delegitimize them and justify de-territorialization. Various federal and state agencies, environmental NGOs and commercial interests, including mass media, collaborate directly and indirectly to recode the status of land and people and the identities of multiple, entangled territories" (Rocheleau, 2015, p.704).

Rocheleau (2015, p.706) concludes that CIPP has been met with "distributed, coordinated, nonviolent territorial resistance by indigenous and campesino communities, supported by continuing and resurgent social movements and civil society networks, and global solidarity initiatives." By contrast, more radical green organizations, such as Maderas and Otros Mundos, were unable to form coalitions at the local level, with the result that their critical environmental narratives, which are similar to those of major environmental organizations, found little local resonance. The success of specific environmental discourses is related to the effectiveness of political practices, especially the ability to form coalitions.

3.3 Intellectual Resistance

Intellectual resistance occurs when activists put their technological knowledge of project means and me-

thods toward the task of stopping work on a project. It can be an effective weapon, but one needs insider knowledge of project plans and how they work for individual companies in given countries. For example, Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) are a standard technical requirement needed before green grab projects can begin. In the Western view, these assessments may be used to delay or halt a project. In the developing world where green grabs are most likely to occur, they are often viewed as a simple paper requirement needed before project startup, and not a means of stopping any project. Indigenous people must rely on outside help to question perfunctory or illegitimate EIAs. For example, in Kenya EIAs are often considered as a formal procedure that appears on a 'to do' list before project implementation (EJOLT, 2014, p.34; Mbonde, 2012). From a company's standpoint, there are many strategies to subvert an EIA, starting with the selection of the consultants who will perform it. In the case of the Tana Integrated Sugar Project, the company, well known for selling irrigation equipment, had no experience in conducting EIAs (Duvial *et al.*, 2012). Because of its complexities, the EIA report is a technical document which many communities and even some professionals are not able to comprehend. With literacy levels in Tana Delta standing at 34% it is doubtful that anyone in these communities has the knowledge to give meaningful feedback to EIAs. Thus, local communities must depend on information given by EIA consultants and their leaders. Most times both leaders and EIA consultants are advocates for the projects. "Consultants are paid by the developer making it difficult for them to recommend that their 'employer' should not proceed with a project. It is quite common to see EIAs that appreciate profound impacts of projects with no mitigation measures and still recommend that the project should proceed" (EJOLT, 2014, p.35). Stakeholder consultative meetings are often called in secrecy without informing organizations that are seen to be troublesome such as environmental NGOs and other opponents. Even consultations with local communities who would bear the full brunt of impacts are often at best severely inadequate. As is true elsewhere in Kenya, projects proposed in the Tana Delta may enjoy political patronage and privileges at very high levels. As such investors may feel they do not have to meet required legal conditions as they are already assured by powerful people that their projects will proceed.

A second example of how intellectual resistance

can work involves forest carbon schemes such as the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation program (REDD), where forests are protected as a means of offsetting carbon polluting practices elsewhere in the world. In south Liberia, a British company attempted to obtain a deal with the government for 400,000 hectares or 1,000 acres of pristine rainforest that would serve as a carbon offset (Leach, 2012). The contract as written did not specify what percentage of the carbon market revenue would return to Liberia's government, nor was their mention of what might happen to indigenous peoples that still lived in or near the forest and used it for hunting and to support their daily livelihoods. A development aid worker from Monrovia read the contract and advised the government that Liberia was not benefitted at all from the contract, and it was canceled.

The intellectual practice called sustainability certification provides still another way that certain non-state entities claim the authority to make rules on environmental and social processes in specified spaces, and to reward producers who can demonstrate adherence to these rules with access to markets for certified products (Vandergeest, Ponte and Bush, 2015). Certification is intended to create market values and manage market risks through the use of sustainability labels. "The label 'fixes' a variety of spaces into one commodified sustainable form, by fixing ecological (and social) problems and setting this repair symbolically into an ecolabel or logo that has exchange and brand value. Sustainability certifications are distinct from the market-oriented conservation programs which are often the focus of the green-grabbing literature, but can be understood as a form of green grabbing in how sustainability certification has been presented by its proponents as an ideal mechanism for selling nature to save it, and thus as a clear expression of a market logic in environmental governance" (p. 2). Coffee drinkers may be familiar with coffee certification, which suggests that certain brands of coffee meet specific sustainability standards to be certified as 100 percent Columbian or Arabican. Such processes are currently being employed to certify seafood, and it is just a matter of time before parcels of land are similarly identified and approved using such high tech methods as satellite imagery to ensure compliance. These methods are probably beyond the intellectual or technological capabilities of most indigenous peoples, thus, intellectual activism from the outside is a treasured resource.

3.4 Local/Cultural Resistance

Resistance may emerge more or less spontaneously at the local level, with help from concerned activists who know from long experience how useful it is to challenge projects early. For example, in the East Ugandan rainforest an area called the Mabira Forest had been protected by the government since 1932. In 2007 Ugandan President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni reversed course, deciding to allocate one-third of the rainforest to the Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited (SCOUL) for the purpose of growing sugarcane. The government predicted that this plan would produce 3,500 jobs and boost Uganda's collected tax revenues (see generally Global Nonviolent Action Base, 2007). A campaign called Save Mabira Crusade in opposition to this plan appeared only two days after the announcement. Campaign sponsors believed that deforestation would promote climate change that would be dangerous to the economy. Environmentalists agreed, saying that the plan might reduce rainfall, would threaten rare species of birds and trees, and that planting sugarcane would lead to soil erosion. Buoyed by the support, the coalition opposing deforestation grew to include other interested stakeholders. It planned a protest walk from the capital, Kampala, to Jinja district where Mabira forest is located — almost 83 kilometers. Police tried to use force to stop the walk and arrest coalition leaders. Pushing and shoving began between police and protestors, after which police shot their weapons in the air to intimidate the crowd. A riot broke out as demonstrators fought back, throwing stones and injuring one of the police. Police then shot into the crowd, with at least one fatality, and arrested about 20 of the demonstrators. After the arrests, the notoriety of the protest grew, drawing even more to the cause. By October 19 it was clear that the campaigners had won and the Mabira Forest, at least for a time, was saved. However, the celebrations were somewhat premature as the forest was once again threatened in 2011.

Aboriginal groups are sometimes lured to neoliberal projects with the promise of making money and the prospect of sharing in the rewards of development. In Tanzania, the government took over areas of land that were once the common property grazing land of Masai pastoralists and sold them to private companies marketing the wildlife values of ecotourism on those lands (Leach, 2012). Pastoralists were excluded from land that was customarily used for grazing animals, but at the same time, some were intrigued by the

idea of making money. According to reports, local actors including the pastoralists did not initially resist such projects by the private sector and the states. However, the newly formed Wildlife Management Areas became centers of conflict whereby locals used the structure of the WMA as a forum to contest the state and advocate on the behalf of indigenous groups. Neoliberalization was therefore simultaneously adopted and challenged (Gardner, 2012; Benjaminsin *et al.*, 2013; Green and Adams, 2015).

In some lands, locals may find that city dwellers move to their area in search of a “rural paradise” far away from city noise and congestion — a phenomenon known as the neo-rural movement. These newcomers arrive with good intentions, wanting to help out with environmentally sound practices and volunteering their time and energy to contribute to these projects. Unfortunately, these outsider ideas about conservation may mirror the same corporate green projects that the locals are already opposing, leading to friction. Neo-rural activists have been known to support restrictions on farming, grazing, and fishing. These changes in land use would have a direct impact on natives' livelihoods (Cortes-Vazquez, 2012; Cortes-Vazquez and Zedalis, 2013; Valcuende, Quintero, and Cortes-Vasquez, 2011). The resulting animosity by locals towards conservation is interpreted by neo-rurals as either their incapability to appreciate the park's natural values, a lack of environmental education, or a selfish attitude towards nature (Cortes-Vazquez, 2012).

Local opposition to green projects is not restricted to developing nations. A type of radical localism and advocacy against environmental projects or regulations has been observed in the First World. Some rural residents of the American West that adhere to the Wise Use philosophy and movement show a similar pattern of opposition. Wise Use is a coalition of groups promoting the expansion of private property rights and reduced regulation of publicly held property by governments. McCarthy (2002) makes a compelling case that these marginalized locals who are resisting interventions by scientific experts, governmental agencies, and transnational environmental organizations do so in a manner that is remarkably like the resistance in developing nations (Peluso, 1993).

3.5 Financial-legal Activism

Financial activism occurs when concerned people and

groups point out to investors the pitfalls of investing in a green project. Financial activists like to say that green grab projects may self-destruct on their own without human resistance due to unanticipated flaws in the planning process and the unintended consequences that appear as the project is executed. The idea or strategy of the project may be flawed. Land negotiations with the host country may be difficult, or the host country's approval process may be unwieldy, leading to delays (Filer, 2012). The timing of the project may be poor, or the investment strategy relied upon to fund the project may fail due to fluctuating commodity prices, leading to the decision to abort the project. For example, during the development of palm oil plantations in Brazil in 1980, the promotion of biodiesel from palm oil was planned in imitation of the Proalcool program. However, because of technical problems and falling oil prices, the program ceased to be pursued at the end of the 1980s and the palm oil project in the Amazon basin was regarded to be a failure (Pye, 2015).

Financial activism directed at institutional investors has also had some success in disrupting futures trading in commodities (including food commodities). A coalition of family farm, faith-based and anti-hunger groups targeted CALSTRS, the California teachers' retirement system. CALSTRS had been considering shifting \$2.5 billion of their portfolio into commodities. In response to the campaign, the CALSTRS board decided to invest no more than \$150 million in commodities for 18 months (GRAIN, 2011a). Similar campaigns targeting banks and governments in Europe have achieved results. By 2013, eleven European banks withdrew investments in agricultural commodities following activist pressure (GRAIN, 2011a).

Legal activism is the filing of lawsuits that might prevent a green project from going forward. In an Argentine project in Rio Negro Province, the Mapuche were contemplating filing an amparo or legal relief action to halt the investment in land by Beidahuang China, arguing that the rights of the original peoples were not taken into account (GRAIN, 2011b). The Mapuche were also denied the right to free prior informed consent, arguing that this right is granted in ILO Convention 169, which Argentina ratified. The Río Negro provincial government had framed the Chinese project as a "food production agreement" and as an investment in irrigation resources in the lower valley of the province. It claimed that this was needed given the national government's failure to fund irriga-

tion infrastructure. Critics contended the agreement was just a land giveaway for industrial soy production, with the Chinese company granted some free, unconditional benefits. Further, environmental experts in the province denounced the project as a form of "ecocide". There were high environmental and health impacts projected in an area that already suffered from low natural precipitation and extremely limited water availability. They additionally pointed to irregularities in the Province's zoning of native forests which would allow the project to go ahead (GRAIN, 2011b).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The evidence suggests that early intervention by transnational activist organizations has been a helpful tool in delaying or canceling green grab projects. There is sometimes a domino effect in this process: as one project falls, others companies decide to quit their plans as well. Thus, investor confidence in green projects can be shaken by the negative experiences of other investors. An important factor to note, however, is that a successful early blockage may be short-lived; it may not be the end of the story. Out of seventeen halted projects referenced by GRAIN (EJOLT, 2014), three gained new life when projects were relocated or transferred to other companies. Such developments are a noteworthy signal to be vigilant over the long term in efforts to stop projects.

A quantitative study of mining projects that were contested over environmental concerns bore some grim news for those trying to stop green projects (EJOLT, 2015). Projects were less likely to be stopped when well-connected and influential firms became involved in the conflict, or when internecine conflicts were present such as corruption, repression and displacement of activists, criminalization and violent targeting of activists, all signaling a powerful and suppressive state. No project was stopped in a low-income country, underlining the financial vulnerability of poorer countries to the pro-development pitch of green companies seeking land.

There is a strong need for discursive practices that challenge the dominant narrative by delegitimation. The literature suggested that some projects have taken on the aura of inevitability, have been sold to both investors and locals as a triple win — something good for business, good for the environment and good for securing a piece of the development pie for local people. Delegitimizing discourses can disrupt the tra-

jectory of this rhetoric and ultimately have the power to erode the moral basis for investing in green projects by challenging them from below. These discourses contain economic, political and social or moral codes that may change perceptions of green grabbing projects both at the individual and societal levels of analysis. Companies are known to react to “shaming” discourses, especially while the project is young. It is better for them to cut losses than to become embarrassed with a negative result.

Virtually nowhere in the green grabbing literature is there a discussion of the sufferings of workers in some green projects. It has been documented that there are 20.9 million slaves in the world, two-thirds of them working in construction and agriculture (Timmerman, 2014), including both children and adults. Some slaves suffer the additional indignities of being sexually abused and arbitrarily shuttled around the world in human trafficking networks. To what extent does this deplorable activity occur at the sites of green grab projects? The answer is not clear at present. There is strong suspicion that this is occurring because states that accept green projects are also home to slavery. When confronted with this evidence, there is a strong moral obligation for activists and researchers to do whatever is possible to protect these vulnerable individuals. However, there are some risks and social costs that may be incurred by activists should they intervene to rectify such a situation. Rocheleau (2015, p.716), reflecting on the situation in Mexico, writes that the resistance (to green grabbing and associated societal ills) has meant a “long list of dead and disappeared persons, many of them promising leaders and all of them someone’s friend, relative, spouse or teacher. There is also the sacrifice of time and energy diverted from building, raising crops and livestock, teaching and learning. The question remains as to whether rural communities in Chiapas will have to continue to pay such a high price to resist the vast,

violent, networked green land grab.”

Secondarily, there is a need for transnational activists and organizations to continue to get involved whenever possible in instances of local resistance. These organizations are best able to build bridges to, and support, all the other nodes of resistance and especially local resistance. By doing so, they connect the problems of locals to larger social structures, thus rendering them “glocal” conflicts (Mills, 1959; Swyngedouw, 1997). Networks such as GRAIN and World Rainforest Movement frame local issues and distribute them into the public eye and to a larger cadre of networks, and can turn conversations about green projects into contentious discourses over the human toll of green projects.

Finally, there is a need for continued nuanced study of green grabbing employing a political ecology perspective. This paper is merely the beginning of this process, one example of how political ecology can frame and analyze the accumulation of land for green dollars, and can articulate conditions for resistance which may not have been contemplated, especially to the community of scholars outside of the field of geography which has been somewhat slow to respond to this crisis. We are just beginning to understand what makes resistance successful. For instance, the degree of democracy in the state, the availability of the rule of law and institutional spaces for protest appear to favor resistance. Other variables that need more careful study include the nationality or ethnicity of the green grabbers, the presence of indigenous peoples, and the nature of the commodity or commodities being touted as a profit making green project. How responsive the home state or the investing company is to initial challenges may also play a role as does the political leverage and skills of the mobilizers and challengers.

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