

The World Bank's land program in the State of Piauí, Brazil, is a license for land grabbing

21 March 2018

The World Bank is financing a land titling, or “regularization” program in the Brazilian State of Piauí, where large areas of land have been grabbed from local communities and illegally occupied by agribusiness. Local communities, including communities of descendants of runaway slaves (quilombolas) as well as indigenous peoples, are being violently displaced from their traditional lands and face contamination of water and soils, increasing violence against community leaders, deforestation and loss of biodiversity.

The escalation of land grabbing in Piauí and the northeastern part of the Brazilian Cerrado is directly related to the inflow of hundreds of millions of dollars from foreign pension funds, university endowments and other financial companies that are acquiring farmlands by way of Brazilian intermediaries. Internal documents show that the World Bank is aware of the extent of land grabbing in the area.

Through a 120 million USD loan, the World Bank thus supports a land titling program that risks sanctifying these land grabs and paving the way for a new rush of 'legalized' land grabbing, with more catastrophic social and environmental consequences.

As the World Bank hosts its annual Land and Poverty Conference in Washington D.C., from 19-23 March 2018, Brazilian social organizations and their international partners and supporters are calling for the Bank to suspend its support for the land titling program in Piauí and to respond to the demands of affected communities.

The World Bank project contains no concrete safeguards to ensure that it actually secures people's tenure rights against dispossession by local agribusiness and speculators, and to guarantee that it does not formalize the dispossession of communities in the context described above. As such, the project does not close the gaps of the state of Piauí's law on land regularization and is not in line with the UN Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (Tenure Guidelines).

The Brazilian Public Prosecutor's Office intervened on 18 December 2017 by issuing a formal recommendation to the World Bank to suspend the land program and to adopt measures to remedy the violations of the land rights of traditional peoples and communities that have already occurred. The World Bank has yet to respond.

We call upon the World Bank to:

- Comply with the recommendations contained in the Brazilian Public Prosecutor's Office's letter by immediately suspending the project “Piauí: Pillars of Growth and Social Inclusion” and the land regularization/titling process in Piauí.
- Respond to the demand of affected communities – which is supported by the Public Prosecutor's Office – to establish a dialogue round table with the objective of assessing the effects of the World Bank-financed land regularization program in Piauí, in order to prevent and remedy violations and to put in place mechanisms, which guarantee local communities control over their territories as well as effective remedies, including the restitution of community lands. The round

table should involve representatives of the affected communities, the agrarian court of the state judiciary (Vara Agrária da Justiça Estadual), the Land Institute of Piauí (Instituto de Terras do Piauí, INTERPI), the state and federal offices of the Public Prosecutor, the State Parliament of Piauí, FAO and support groups from civil society. This dialogue round table should be convened by FAO as the leading UN agency for the implementation of the Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests.

- To publicly disclose how the land titling/regularization project in Piauí and any other loans, projects and operations the World Bank is involved with, are in compliance with the Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests.

This statement is endorsed by the following organizations and networks:

Ação Acadêmica para o Desenvolvimento das Comunidades Rurais, Moçambique
ActionAid Brazil
ActionAid USA
Amazon Watch
Articulação Nacional das Pescadoras, Brazil
Articulação Piauiense dos Povos Impactados pelo MATOPIBA, Brazil
Associação dos Advogados dos Trabalhadores Rurais, Brazil
Associação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil
Campanha Nacional em Defesa do Cerrado, Brazil
Caritas Piauí, Brazil
Centro de agricultura alternativa do Norte de Minas Gerais, Brazil
Centro Internazionale Crocevia, Italy
Coletivo das Comunidades de Fundo e Fecho de Pasto, Brazil
Comissão de Povos Originários Populações e Comunidades Tradicionais do Fama 2018, Brazil
Comissão Nacional de Fortalecimento de Reservas Extrativistas e dos Povos Extrativistas Costeiros e Marinheiros, Brazil
Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT), Brazil
Community Alliance for Global Justice, USA
Conselho Indigenista Missionário (Cimi), Brazil
Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores, Brazil
Coordenação Nacional da Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais Quilombolas, Brazil
Development and Peace - Caritas Canada
Eco Ruralis, Romania
Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria
Family Farm Defenders, USA
Federação de Órgãos para Assistência Social e Educacional (FASE), Brazil
FIAN Belgium
FIAN BRASIL
FIAN Germany
FIAN International
FIAN Sweden
Focus on the Global South
Friends of the Earth US
Global Exchange, USA
GRAIN

Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, USA
Grassroots International, USA
HEKS/EPER, Switzerland
Housing and Land Rights Network – Habitat International Coalition
Inclusive Development International, USA
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, USA
Instituto Mais Democracia, Brazil
Instituto Sociedade Proteção e Natureza, Brazil
International Indian Treaty Council, USA
Just Foreign Policy, USA
La Via Campesina
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, USA
Masifundise, South Africa
Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), Brazil
Movimento Interegional das Quebradeiras de Coco Babaçu, Brazil
Movimento Trabalhadores Camponeses, Brazil
Movimentos dos Pescadores e Pescadoras Artesanais, Brazil
National Family Farm Coalition, USA
Observatório das Nacionalidades, Brazil
Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, Presbyterian Church, USA
Rede Pantaneira, Brazil
Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos, Brazil
Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food
Solidarity Sweden - Latin America (SAL)
Terra Nuova, Italy
Universidade Estadual do Ceará (UECE), Brazil
US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA)
WhyHunger, USA
World Forum of Fisher Peoples

Note: The World Bank's support for land titling or "regularization" in the state of Piauí

On 21 December 2015, the World Bank approved a 120 million USD loan to the government of Piauí. The loan agreement for the project “Piauí: Pillars of Growth and Social Inclusion” (project no. P129342) was signed on 27 April 2016, and the project will run until 31 December 2020 with the stated objective of benefiting “the state’s rural poor by increasing and improving services in education, health, agriculture and water resources.”

One of the components of the project is the regularization of land in Piauí. Subcomponent 1.4 of the loan aims at the “strengthening real property rights,” through the support to the implementation of Piauí’s Land Tenure Regulation Program. This program is set forth in the Piauí State law 6.709 from September 28, 2015, on regularization of ownership and colonization of lands belonging to the state of Piauí, which have been characterized as vacant. The law is accompanied by Decree 1.634/2015, which sets as objectives until 31 December 2019 the issuing of 11,000 titles for family farmers, the regulation of six quilombola communities and the privatization (through selling and leasing) of four million hectares of land. The World Bank project has set the target of 5,000 land titles to be delivered by the end of 2019. In addition, the project aims at issuing land titles to eight quilombola communities.

The World Bank justifies its support to the regularization program by arguing that the lack of formal land titles is a major obstacle to increasing incomes in rural communities in a context of widespread rural poverty in Piauí. According to project documents, the “land regularization through the provision of full land tenure titles to small farmers contributes to social and productive inclusion because land: (i) is their primary means for growing crops that can improve food security and quality, reducing vulnerability to hunger and generating livelihoods; (ii) constitutes the main vehicle for investing, accumulating wealth, and transferring resources between generations; and, (iii) provides farmers with a basic social safety net. Furthermore, formal land ownership facilitates access to credit and subsidized financing lines, such as the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (PRONAF) and National Rural Housing Program (PNHR).”

As a matter of fact, the World Bank has been supporting land regularization and formalization in Piauí for many years. The current project was approved together with another loan of 200 million USD (“Piauí: Productive and Social Inclusion”, project no. P146981) with similar components and which ended on 31 August 2017. Both loans/projects are the continuation of a previous project of 350 million USD (“Piauí: Green Growth and Inclusion”, project no. P126449, approved on 6 March 2012 and closed on 30 March 2013), which also included the issuing of tenure titles as one of its pillars.

According to the World Bank’s most recent Implementation Status & Results Report (dated 17 January 2018), so far 258 beneficiaries have received registered land titles under the current loan, while another 336 beneficiaries were in the final stages of receiving their title before the end of 2017, bringing the total so far to 694 beneficiaries with a registered land title. This means that the project target of 2000 land titles issued in 2016 and 2017 (cumulative) was not achieved. According to the same report, there are currently 7,937 requests filed by small-scale farmers for land titles through the state program and eight teams in place to “execute land tenure regularization activities.” Five quilombola communities have further received land titles under the project.

Land grabbing and environmental destruction in Piauí

The World Bank project is intervening in a region, which is currently facing high degrees of land grabbing and land-conflicts, which are linked to the expansion of monocultures into the region known as MATOPIBA, and the Brazilian Cerrado more generally. Extensive research by CSOs and an international fact-finding mission, which took place in September 2017, has documented severe impacts on local communities and the ecosystem. Loss of land, food insecurity, disputes over water use and pollution of water, violence against community leaders, deforestation and loss of biodiversity through the destruction of the Cerrado biome are among the most critical impacts. The research has also documented the links to the ongoing land grab and transnational financial actors, in particular pension funds in the USA and Europe.

The expansion of soy monocultures into the Cerrado has led to an explosion of land prices and speculation. Companies and individual investors are making a business with land, by enclosing areas that are without property title and creating farms/fazendas, which are then sold. Fraud and falsification of land titles is common (grilagem) as land grabbers seek to legalize the appropriation of lands, including those that have been occupied and used by local communities over generations.

Protecting and securing people’s land rights or legalizing grabs?

In this situation, the World Bank project has a high risk of further deteriorating the situation, by legalizing illegal and/or illegitimate appropriation of community lands and triggering further dispossession and environmental destruction. Project documents recognize that “high global commodity prices have driven the exploitation of the Cerrado biome for commercial agriculture, generating an unorganized occupation

of large areas of land, frequently with little or no regulation. [...] Vulnerable communities on public lands, including both quilombola settlements and smallholders engaged in family agriculture, are at risk of losing some or all of their land rights if their occupation is not regularized. In addition, the disorderly and illegal occupation of rural land (grilagem) is common, especially in the Cerrado, generating tax losses and other adverse social, environmental and economic effects.” According to the World Bank, the regularization of local communities’ occupation through the state’s Land Tenure Regulation Program should protect them against losing their land.

However, the project contains no concrete safeguards to ensure that it actually secures people’s tenure rights against dispossession by local agribusiness and speculators, and to guarantee that it does not formalize the dispossession of communities in the context described above. It also has no clear focus on small-scale peasant communities, by including also explicitly “medium and large farmers” into the regularization process. The project further (implicitly) focuses on the issuing of individual titles, without giving due consideration of other – collective – forms of tenure that are common in many communities in the Cerrado. Finally, the project contributes to the privatization of public land in a very sensitive ecosystem/biome, which is at great risk due to continued deforestation.

As such, the project does not close the gaps of the state of Piauí’s law on land regularization and is not in line with the UN Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (Tenure Guidelines). Indeed, while the state law mentions the observance of the social function of property (art. 14 §1, 2) and the preservation of the environment as criteria for regularizing property, and further stipulates the need to reconcile the regularization of state public lands with the national agrarian reform plan (art. 28) while prioritizing the attribution of public lands with the objectives of settling rural workers and protect natural ecosystems (art. 32), it does not establish a clear regulatory framework for governance of land, fisheries and forests, which prioritizes the realization of the human right to food and other human rights of marginalized groups (paragraph 1.1 of the Tenure Guidelines). The law also lacks a gender equity approach, which is one of the main principles of responsible governance (Tenure Guidelines, paras. 3B4, 4.6, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5). It further lacks a participatory approach of the most affected groups in the process of identifying the legitimate tenure rights of traditional communities living on public lands (see Tenure Guidelines paras. 7.3 and 8.2), which takes into account existing power relations (see Tenure Guidelines paras. 3B6 and 9.9). In addition, the law (implicitly) prefers tenure rights in the form of individual/family property rights when it comes to regularizing the ownership of traditional communities and does not explicitly state the need to recognize collective and customary forms of tenure of land, fisheries and forests. The Tenure Guidelines emphasize the need to provide appropriate recognition and protection of all legitimate tenure rights, including the legitimate tenure rights of indigenous peoples and other communities with customary tenure systems (para. 9.4). They also specifically underline the need for states to recognize and protect collectively managed lands and their related systems of collective use and management, including in processes of allocation (para. 8.3).

Stop the land regularization process in Piauí

Taking into account the critical situation in the Cerrado and the risk of formalizing land dispossession through the land regularization process, the Brazilian Public Prosecutor’s Office formally recommended on 18 December 2017 to immediately suspend the application of the state law no. 6.709/2015 until measures have been taken to ensure the possibility of collective titling for communities and ensure their free, prior and informed consent regarding land attributions. The Prosecutor’s Office further recommends identifying and documenting the local traditional communities’ forms of tenure and use of natural resources through an anthropologic study as well as consultations with affected communities. The

recommendation underlines the importance of consulting the affected communities about how their traditional forms of tenure and resource use should be protected.

The recommendation of the Public Prosecutor's Office is addressed to INTERPI (Instituto de Terras do Piauí, Land Institute of Piauí), as well as the World Bank, calling upon the latter "to adopt measures to assess and correct the negative effects of the World Bank-financed land regularization program in the State of Piauí, in order to prevent and remedy violations of the land rights of traditional peoples and communities."

The recommendation of the Public Prosecutor's Office supports the demands of eight affected communities from the municipalities of Gilbués, Santa Filomena and Bom Jesus who – in a letter sent to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on 11 December 2017 – have asked for the establishment of a round table for dialogue in order to assess the land regularization process and discuss its objectives, including the importance of collective registration of community lands. The communities propose that this round table be composed of the agrarian court of the state judiciary (Vara Agrária da Justiça Estadual), INTERPI and representatives of the communities and with the participation of the state and federal Public Prosecutor's Offices, the World Bank, the State Parliament of Piauí, FAO and support groups from civil society.

The World Bank has not responded to the letter of the Public Prosecutor's Office. According to media reports, the governor of Piauí has recently announced that the implementation of the land regularization program will move on.