



Global Lessons from the Struggle to Secure Community Land Rights in the Brazilian Cerrado

**A report by The Social Network for Justice and
Human Rights (Rede Social) in collaboration
with ActionAid USA**

May 2022

“There was a river that I had known since I was a child, and it was the most beautiful thing in the world. But a farm called Insolo [owned by Harvard University’s endowment] deforested 10,000 hectares, and the water dried up.

...I am a Black woman and a defender of the environment. We will not be silent.”

— Community Leader from Piauí, Brazil

■ Financial and Institutional Context of the Community Land Rights Struggle

In the aftermath of the food, real estate, and financial crises of 2007-2008 in the United States and Europe, researchers from The Social Network for Justice and Human Rights (Rede Social) identified a new push in the Brazilian Cerrado by international financial companies to speculate in farmland as a financial asset. This trend continues today and represents a massive transfer of vital food-producing resources from rural communities to large plantations based on mono-cropping of commodities and chemical inputs. As a result of investors feeding money to land grabbers, rural communities are losing their farms and forests, and peasant agroecological production for local markets is being destroyed by industrial plantations that grow commodities for export. The financialization of farmland has been a steadily growing trend, and now the world faces new price spikes triggered by COVID-19 and the invasion of Ukraine that will likely intensify the farmland rush led by companies managing great financial wealth.

One of the main countries targeted by financiers is Brazil, where pension funds, endowment funds, and agribusiness corporations from the United States, Canada and Europe are stimulating land grabbing, displacement of rural communities from their land, and environmental destruction. Two of the leading entities involved in land speculation are US-based TIAA (Teachers' Insurance and Annuity Association), a for-profit company which manages retirement funds for employees of universities, hospitals, and non-profit organizations, and the Harvard Management Company of Harvard University.¹

These companies have tried to circumvent Brazilian legislation that limits foreign ownership of land by using Brazilian shell companies such as Radar Corporation to acquire farms in Brazil². Radar was formed by TIAA, which created a complex structure of subsidiary companies to speculate in farmland. TIAA also manages funding from other sources in the United States, Europe, and Canada, such as the Caisse de Dépôts et Placement du Québec and the British Columbia Investment Management Corporation from Canada; Sweden's AP2; Stichting Pensioenfond ABP from the Netherlands; the German Ärzteversorgung Westfalen-Lippe; the National Pension Service of Korea; the Cummins UK Pension Plan Trustee Ltd.; the Environment Agency Pension Fund and Greater Manchester Pension Fund from the UK; and a variety of state and local government pension funds in the United States.³

Public policies and support from intergovernmental institutions are crucial to protecting the land rights of Indigenous Peoples and peasant communities in the face of the financialization of land and the expansion of industrial agriculture. However, governments and their institutions often play a contradictory role. They frequently pay "lip service" to prioritizing the land rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups while in policy and practice supporting the expansion of agribusiness at the permanent expense of these communities and peoples.

This report highlights the role of the World Bank, which has a continuing history of projects that serve the interests of global and national elites in the name of economic growth while undermining land rights and social equality of poorer and less powerful groups in spite of the recent adoption of safeguards. A case in point is the World Bank's land titling programs from 1998-2015 in the north of Guatemala following the Guatemalan civil war. The genocide of the war was compounded by the Bank's project, which resulted in the displacement and disappearance of numerous communities of Indigenous Peoples when families came under increased pressure to transfer their newly titled land to buyers for palm oil plantations, including threats of violence.⁴ This report on the case in the northeast of Brazil shows that organized communities can pressure the World Bank to do more to support their land rights. It also confirms that community land rights remain a low priority for the Bank, which continues to prefer privatizing land rights in ways that give easy access to big buyers.

The Cerrado Region of Brazil

The main area targeted by the financialization of farmland in Brazil is the Cerrado (Brazilian savannah), which is the richest savannah in the world in terms of biodiversity and water sources and the home of hundreds of communities of small farmers, both Indigenous and Quilombola (rural Afro-Brazilian). Local communities have maintained their traditional ways of protecting natural resources in the Cerrado, where forests and grasslands have a deep root system that stores massive amounts of carbon dioxide and underground water. The Brazilian Cerrado includes eleven states, as indicated in the map⁵ below:



Nearly 80% of Brazil's rivers originate in the Cerrado, and its destruction can have an impact in the whole Hemisphere. The destruction of the Cerrado by agribusiness has altered the rainfall patterns in the region, which now suffers from drought. Many rivers have dried up as their sources were destroyed by plantations that deplete the water with massive irrigation systems and pollute the soil and the groundwater with chemical inputs.

Rural communities depend on this water for human consumption, fishing, and food production. Aerial spraying of agrochemical is often used, which pollutes rivers and the water table, kills fish and rural communities' crops, contaminates food, and raises the incidence of diseases such as cancer. The use of chemical inputs is creating an environmental imbalance and increasing the number of pests affecting the crops of local communities. The deforestation of the Cerrado causes the extinction of endangered species, disrupting biodiversity, which makes the environment more vulnerable to pandemics and health crises.

The main region targeted by financial speculation in farmland in Brazil is MATOPIBA—the region formed by the states of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia. International financial corporations partner with local land grabbers who use violence and fraud to take over lands from local communities and transfer them to foreign-controlled companies, which often use opaque structures to hide their involvement. The result is an escalation in human rights violations against rural communities and environmental destruction. Land speculation causes the displacement of peasant, Indigenous, and rural Afro-Brazilian communities (Quilombolas), forcing them into degrading conditions of work in plantations, which can be considered

contemporary forms of slavery.⁶ As these communities are forced to migrate to urban areas, their housing, food, and labor conditions deteriorate⁷.

Brazil has one of the highest levels of land concentration in the world. Extensive monocropping of agricultural commodities cannot be sustainable. This system is based on chemical inputs and fossil fuels, constituting a major cause of climate change. Currently, there is a growing concentration of control over food production, fueled by international financial speculation in rural land markets. The production of food for subsistence and for local markets is frequently ignored in official economic data despite its central role for generating income, economic development, employment, and food security. A key dynamic is the extraction and pollution of water by expanding agribusiness, which violates the fundamental right of access to water for human consumption.

Interviews with community members about the impacts of agribusiness

Community residents in the states of Piauí and Maranhão who have been impacted by land grabbing in the region report that rivers are drying up. Their flow has decreased, and there are also changes in rain cycles. Large irrigation systems of monocropping plantations destroy springs and wetlands, causing water pollution and a scarcity of fish and local fauna. One resident summarized, *“There was a river that I had known since I was a child, and it was the most beautiful thing in the world. But a farm called Insolo (owned by Harvard University’s endowment) deforested 10,000 hectares, and the water dried up. We go there, and it’s the saddest thing.”*⁸

Local communities are also impacted by the use of pesticides and other chemical inputs by large plantations in the region. Since 2019, the Brazilian government stimulated an increase in the use of pesticides by agribusiness by allowing the commercialization of over 500 new pesticides, many of them prohibited in other countries.

A community member from Piauí state, where Insolo (Harvard) farms are located, explained how agribusiness poisons the region: *“They do aerial spraying, then use the worm-killing agent directly on the ground and, when the soybeans are already planted and ready for harvest, they use a desiccant pesticide. And there is one more, which you can’t endure the headache it gives, that they spray by plane.”*

A community resident in southern Piauí reported that the water is poisoned during the October-April rainy season: *“The water from the mountains goes down into the stream full of pesticides. Here we just have water from the river to drink; we drink the poison that falls from the mountains in the river water.”* Communities are left with no alternative but to consume contaminated water, as another resident describes: *“I sense the smell when I take the glass in my mouth to drink. You get that smell but you just drink, unfortunately, because we don’t have any other water.”*

Riverside community members explain that the contamination by pesticides causes respiratory and skin problems: *“When I step into the river, [the skin on] my foot starts to crack. Everyone complains about pesticides.”*

“My godfather died of cancer of the lung two weeks ago. I think his death has to do with breathing pesticides. Never had I heard of cancer around here, and now it’s something without limit,” reports another resident. *“Also, diarrhea is attacking with vomiting. Right now, a little baby is so sick, vomiting and crying.”*

Agribusiness corporations aerially spray pesticides, which contaminates food production in local communities, as one resident describes: *“When the plane turns around, its tap is open and reaches the bottom. The poison falls on our production and burns our corn, beans, rice, broad beans. Before the large farms were here this didn’t happen.”*

With the application of pesticides by agribusiness in the plateaus, insects and other fauna tend to seek more conducive places in the community fields, further compromising their food production and creating environmental imbalance. For example, grasshoppers, monkeys, and rheas are among the species that have smaller habitats for food and reproduction.

Animals consume water from the same source in the rivers. *“Cattle drink these waters and stay skinny, poisoned. It’s not hunger, because here for us it’s green. It is toxic water that is making us lose the cattle.”* Residents also note that there are few fish, and, in the rainy months, they frequently see dead fish: *“When we go fishing in the river, we see the small fish floating on top, dead. It’s because of the poison because before it didn’t happen. Before having these plantations that put poison with airplanes, we didn’t see these fish dead.”*

Another problem caused by agribusiness is the way corporations discard toxic materials, such as pesticide packaging, as explained by a resident: *“They made a dump at the side of the mountain, which is another way for pesticides enter into our wetlands. And the animals from the Cerrado consume the garbage and die because everything is poisoned.”*

Rural communities have long denounced the negative impacts of agribusiness that compromise their livelihoods and aggravate climate change, thus posing a risk to our entire society. The expansion of agribusiness is causing the destruction of biodiverse habitats, displacing wild species and accentuating genetic mutations. The current global environmental crisis and pandemics like COVID-19 demand a deep reflection on the use of land and the urgent need for the protection of biodiversity⁹ and ecological agriculture, which produces healthy and affordable food for local markets.

Despite all of these difficulties, communities in the Cerrado are organizing to advance the formal recognition of their land rights within the new state system of titling, a process known in Brazil as “regularization” due to the need to correct the large number of irregular land titles and fraudulent documents used by land grabbers. However, even after some communities regularized their land rights in Piauí, they continued to report threats by land grabbers and impacts by agribusiness corporations. International coalition-building and solidarity with rural communities in Brazil requires ongoing monitoring, research, documentation, communication and advocacy work.

■ International coalition-building and community-organizing

The impacts of farmland speculation brought together of a coalition of organizations in Brazil, the United States, Canada, and Europe, including ActionAid, Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT), GRAIN, FIAN, Friends of the Earth, Grassroots International, Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns, National Family Farm Coalition, Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos, The Rural Coalition, and Uprooted and Rising.

The participation of U.S. farmers and rural communities in the coalition is significant because they also face the destruction of their livelihoods and communities by the same financial actors, including TIAA and Harvard, who are taking control of land in the U.S. and creating agribusiness’ increased concentration of control. The coalition has coordinated several advocacy initiatives, including the publication of reports¹⁰, communication and public education work, seminars, petitions, organizing at universities in the United States, and an international fact-finding mission to Brazil.

The coalition’s research, education, and advocacy work is channeled back to the impacted communities in Brazil, equipping them to resist displacement, organize for the recognition of their land rights, and protect their knowledge of ecological food production. These interlinked strategies increase human rights protection and create pressure for the return of illegally seized lands and changes to a state law that

would recognize the land rights of communities in the Cerrado. Before the coalition started this work, rural communities in the affected areas were isolated, and now they are starting a process of guaranteeing land rights.

The coalition is currently connected with 31 Indigenous, Quilombola, and other traditional communities¹¹ that are advocating for collective land regularization. The work includes supporting the land regularization process, providing legal defense to the communities, and denouncing cases of violence by agribusiness and land grabbers. The grassroots education process by Rede Social and CPT facilitated community-organizing spaces. The communities formed a coordinating group and selected representatives to meet on a regular basis to organize and share experiences. The scope of the work is still limited compared to the need since there are hundreds of impacted communities in the region.

Key Milestones for Communities Working With the Social Network and the Pastoral Land Commission in Piauí:

- Formation of a coordinating group, the People's Collective of Traditional Communities.
- Communities and their allies shared information about financial corporations' land speculation, and the communities are better prepared to organize for land rights.
- Community complaints prompted a local judge in the state of Piauí to cancel land grabbers' fraudulent titles for a total of over 124,000 hectares.
- After several meetings in Brazil and the United States, letters, and a petition to its Inspection Panel, the World Bank changed the focus of its project in the region, which was originally designed to privatize community land.
- In December of 2019, the State Legislator Assembly in Piauí approved a new law (number 7.294/2019) determining that Indigenous, Quilombola and other traditional communities have the right to collective land rights regularization.
- The state recognized the rights of traditional peasant communities and started the process for the regularization of collective land rights.
- Interpi (Land Institute of Piauí) began anthropological studies in some communities as a first step towards regularizing collective land rights. Communities participated in territorial mapping in their lands.
- Salto, a traditional riverside community won a collective title to their land with the support of the Collective of Communities Impacted by Agribusiness, created by rural communities in the Cerrado region of Piauí to resist land grabbing. The Pastoral Land Commission, the Network for Social Justice and Human Rights, and the Association of Rural Workers' Lawyers provided accompaniment and legal support through this process.
- A Brazilian court ruled in favor of the Indigenous Gamela people to protect their territory in the state of Piauí, allowing them to retake their land, from which they had been illegally removed.

Currently communities in two territories have concluded their land regularization (Riozinho and Salto); two territories are in the final stages of regularization (Melancias and Chupé); four territories are in advanced stages, and seven new territories were included in the process (Cabeceiras do Rio, Corrente do Matões, Araças, Boa Esperança, Matas, Almecigas, and Cabeceiras do Angelim). A summary of these processes by territory follows:

Rio Preto Territory, including the communities of Rio Preto, Barra do Correntinho, Aroeira, Sucuriú

Rio Preto is an indigenous territory where four communities have been organizing to secure their land rights. One of the communities, Rio Preto, was able to have collective land regularization, and, in Barra do Correntinho, the process is almost completed. The regularization process is on the way in the other two communities.

Salto Territory, including the communities of Salto de São Jorge and Salto do São Jose

The Salto territory has been organizing for land regularization since 2017. These traditional riverside communities formed an association to demand collective land rights. In 2019, Iterpi started an anthropological study in the area, which was completed in 2020. The final regularization process was completed in June of 2021.

Morro D'água de Baixo and Morro D'água da Gruta Territories of two Indigenous Gamela communities Beginning in 2018, the communities participated in anthropological studies and a participatory mapping project in partnership with Rede Social, CPT and University of Piauí. In 2020, Iterpi started the collective regularization of the area, which is almost completed. The regularization process in Morro D'água da Gruta suspended the expansion of an agribusiness project by Insolo, which is a subsidiary of Harvard University.

Melancias Territory includes six communities: Sumidouro, Passagem da Nega, Riacho dos Cavalos, Riacho das Éguas, Melancia I, Melancias II

These are traditional “ribeirinho brejeiro” communities that live and produce their food by the rivers. They were impacted by the Insolo corporation, the subsidiary of Harvard University. The communities resisted several incidents of displacement, as well as the impacts of agribusiness such as water pollution with pesticides, deforestation, and the closure of their access to roads in the area. The fact-finding mission organized by Rede Social, CPT and FIAN created visibility to build solidarity with these communities. Rede Social was able to support the installation of Internet services in these communities, which are important spaces for organizing and communication. In 2020, Iterpi started the anthropological study and the collective regularization of the area, which is currently in process.

Brejo do Miguel Territory includes two communities: Brejo do Miguel and Lagoa dos Martins

Brejo do Miguel Territory is located by the Uruçuí Vermelho River. The communities have suffered violence and death threats, and they have had some of their houses destroyed. The communities organized in groups to demand collective land rights. Iterpi completed the anthropological study in the area, and the collective regularization of their land is in process.

Vão do Vico Territory, Indigenous Gamela community

This Indigenous territory suffered the impacts of agribusiness and land speculation by TIAA and Harvard. It suffered violence, the burning of houses, the destruction of food production, and death threats by armed militias. Rede Social, CPT and AATR provided legal support, and denounced the violence against the

communities to the Public Prosecutor's office. As a result, the state government recognized this Indigenous community, and completed an anthropological study. The community was also part of our participatory mapping project. The collective land regularization is in process. Currently, Indigenous youth play a key role in community organizing, preserving their identity and knowledge.

Chupé Territory includes four communities: Chupé, Barra da Lagoa, Brejo Seco and Brejo das Meninas

The Chupé community was regularized before the new state law, so the families hold individual land titles, which leave the community in a more vulnerable position. The other communities started the process of collective land regularization, and all four communities have access to electricity. They have been recognized by the state as traditional communities.

Riozinho Territory includes six communities: Santa Fé, Angical, Brejinho, Brejo Feio, and Brejo da Areia, Lagoa

Riozinho territory was impacted by a deal made with land grabbers by Harvard University, but that project was suspended after the communities started to organize. In 2019, the communities received individual land regularization for 312 families. They also have electricity and internet access.

Baixão Fechado Territory includes four communities: Baixão Fechado, Lagoa, Aldeinha, and Fortaleza

Baixão Fechado territory is located across the border in the state of Maranhão and thus has not been included in the land regularization process because the World Bank project is limited to the state of Piauí. These communities suffered land grabbing by both Radar (a subsidiary of TIAA) and Insolo (a subsidiary of Harvard University). They have received threats from local land grabbers and militia groups. The communities are resisting these threats of displacement and working to advance agroecological food production.

The role of World Bank in Piauí Land Regularization

In 2015, the World Bank approved loans of \$320 million to support "Pillars of Growth and Social Inclusion" in the state of Piauí. A key part of the loans included support for land titling, but, a couple years into the project, the organized traditional communities of Piauí denounced the World Bank project as mainly strengthening the state titling system for the benefit of large farms, legalizing land grabs and completing the privatization of public lands.

Piauí is characterized by small-scale family farms, which account for 91 percent of the state's farms even though many of their land rights are not recognized. The lack of effective protection of local communities persists despite the fact that they are supposed to be protected under Brazilian legislation, and land occupied and used by communities for several generations is recognized as creating legitimate tenure rights. The World Bank's project needed to focus on land rights of local communities. In addition, it needed to address a problem with the demarcation process that started in some of the communities but has not included their entire territory, particularly lands used by the communities on the plateaus (chapadas) above their dwellings along the river.

ActionAid, Rede Social, CPT, FIAN and other allies did advocacy work in both Brazil and in the United States to call the project into question, as it was clearly propping up government support for agribusiness expansion, which included the privatization of community lands throughout MATOPIBA region¹². In March of 2018, a statement signed by Brazilian and international environmental and human rights organizations called upon the World Bank to take action to ensure that its project did not legitimize dispossession of

local communities.¹³ As a result, the World Bank sent representatives to Brazil to respond to our concerns and partially changed the focus of the project.

The coalition engaged in an organizing strategy, including seminars and meetings of Rede Social, CPT, and local communities. The result was a strong letter from the communities to the World Bank, a petition to the WB Inspection Panel, as well as a petition to a local court in Piauí, which resulted in a legal process to guarantee collective land rights of the communities in partnership with CPT, Rede Social, and the Association of Lawyers for Land Rights (AATR).

In 2019, several local communities filed a complaint with the World Bank's Inspection Panel asking for swift action to ensure that the World Bank-financed land titling project did not legitimize land grabs and ecosystem destruction. In February of 2020, World Bank management responded to the communities' request for inspection, and, in March of 2020, after the Inspection Panel conducted an eligibility visit to Brazil, the Panel issued a report declining the request to further investigate.¹⁴ The Panel's report recognized the legitimacy of the community concerns but argued that the problems were not caused by the World Bank project itself but rather by government and private sector activities outside the scope of the project. Despite the Panel's decision not to investigate further, the international coalition continued to insist that the World Bank has a responsibility to act in response to the concerns expressed by the communities. The communities then sent a letter to the state government, which they shared with the Bank, indicating that incursions into the lands of traditional communities and acts of violence were continuing during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵

As a result of this advocacy work, the World Bank project in Piauí ended up supporting the process of land regularization in 10 communities. However, the project gave even larger support to the privatization and individualization of land rights in agrarian reform communities, which previously had community land rights under Brazilian law. The World Bank support for privatization of these lands creates individual titles that can be sold on open markets rather than only transferred within the community, which creates great risk that communities will be undermined and end up losing most of their land in the context of agribusiness expansion¹⁶.

The World Bank is believed to be starting a new project in Piauí but has not released information about it. CPT has tried to contact local representatives in Piauí to request information but has not received a response. In August of 2021, the World Bank and Interpi did not allow CPT representatives to participate in an evaluation of the current project. For the new project, CPT is advocating for land regularization in 12 additional communities. This process requires monitoring and advocacy work both locally and internationally.

Legal advocacy

Advocacy work in Brazil included several meetings with agrarian courts investigating land grabbing, representatives from the Land Institute responsible for title regularization in Piauí, World Bank representatives, rural union members, university professors and students, local legislators, journalists, and grassroots lawyers. These contacts were important because the rural communities now know that they are not isolated. Fieldwork by Rede Social resulted in building new alliances with other affected communities in the region to demand land rights, as well as bringing international solidarity and visibility to the issue. Rede Social coordinated with a group of human rights lawyers to work on the land regularization cases.

Reflecting on the demarcation and collective land title won by the riverside community of Salto in June of 2021, a lawyer for Association of Rural Workers' Lawyers (AATR) explained: "The World Bank, which is a partner of the state of Piauí, has been financing the state's land agency and sectors of Piauí's judiciary

[...] what we have seen is precisely the intensification of conflicts, mainly due to the recognition of private ownership of illegally occupied farms. There are often new attacks, but our activities are committed to ensuring the definitive title of the territories that, ultimately, does not guarantee an end to these attacks but gives them much greater security. The titling of the traditional community of Salto, especially since it was a collective and definitive title, is very important to stop the devastation of the Cerrado region, and, of course, to guarantee this right to these families who take their livelihood from the land. It is also important to remember the role of Indigenous and traditional communities in the preservation of the Cerrado biome. So, it is an important achievement.”

Based on a petition submitted by Rede Social, CPT, and AATR, an investigation by the Public Prosecutors Office and the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCRA) in Brazil exposed how Harvard University and TIAA avoided a Brazilian law that limits foreign ownership of land in order to acquire farms in regions from where local communities have been displaced¹⁷.

TIAA and Harvard are the largest foreign buyers of farmland in Brazil. Since 2008, they have amassed a combined total of around 750,000 hectares, most of it in the Northeastern part of Brazil within the country’s biodiverse Cerrado savannah region. These companies use opaque corporate structures running through offshore jurisdictions to conceal and evade Brazilian legislation restricting foreign ownership of farmland.

INCRA’s investigation details how all of the lands acquired by TIAA after 2010 were done in violation of Brazilian laws governing the acquisition of farmlands by foreign entities. In INCRA’s view, TIAA’s land purchases, which were conducted via the Brazilian company Radar Propriedades Agrícolas and numerous other Brazilian subsidiaries, should be considered together as part of the same economic group. As a result, INCRA recommends that all of the lands purchased via TIAA’s subsidiaries since 2010 covering more than 150,000 hectares be null and void.

In October of 2020, the State Court of Bahia issued an order blocking the registration of lands for one of Harvard’s largest farmland acquisitions in Brazil— a 107,000-hectare agglomeration of lands known as Gleba Campo Largo. The court also reopened an investigation into Harvard’s acquisition of the Campo Largo lands based on evidence provided by the state prosecutor that these were public lands that had been illegally transferred to private ownership.

In order to avoid the consequences of these legal cases, the Harvard endowment fund has decided to spin off¹⁸ its farmland division into an independent private equity corporation called Solum Partners, which has AIG insurance group as a partner. However, as INCRA’s position on the TIAA case explains, under Brazilian law, foreign corporations and their subsidiaries should be considered part of the same economic group.

This is a key moment for our coalition to continue pressuring the World Bank, Harvard University, and TIAA and support grassroots advocacy in defense of land rights for local communities. The dramatic global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic shows the urgent need to protect rural communities, ecological agriculture, and biodiversity.

■ Global Lessons

The negative impact of the use of non-profit money by companies like TIAA and Harvard on communities in northeast Brazil and the environment and climate shows the need for drastic changes in the way we think about land and investment for the future. Land and associated water resources should be in control of local communities and Indigenous Peoples who identify with the land. They have the history and the opportunity to understand the importance of caring for its biodiversity for their livelihoods and their environment and

by extension to understand its importance to the climate and the well-being of all. Studies have proven again and again that small-scale food producers are able to use land for food production with greater resource efficiency and increased biodiversity. Large farms, in contrast, take advantage of economies of scale in global markets to displace small food producers and bypass the provision of local and regional markets, failing to provide opportunities for local livelihoods and economies.

International institutions, such as the World Bank and even some non-profits, are promoting large-scale farms owned and managed by those who live far from the land and the future consequences of its management. Low-level lip service to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) policies are used to portray these farms as beneficial, ignoring the damage and long-term problems of greater inequality in resource control that these investors create.

The World Bank's projects in the state of Piauí illustrate how large-scale agribusiness interests are furthered, even as the Bank claims to be acting in support of marginalized communities. When there is enough pressure from communities and their allies, the Bank shifts to devote some support to community land rights recognition. This is possible because there are some staff within the Bank that understand the problems and see the need, but support is limited to a few "traditional" communities. This limited support occurs in the context of the state awarding large areas of common lands that were key to the environmental health and livelihoods of these communities to industrial agriculture. In the Piauí Pillars of Growth Project, the bulk of the Bank's resources were not devoted to protecting the resources and supporting the food systems and access to markets of small producers. Instead, the Bank's money went to education and health services in central towns and cities with the expectation that people should be migrating away from rural communities to get access to these services.

While the project made progress on collective land rights for ten "traditional" peasant communities and one Afro-Brazilian Quilombola community, at least 8,996 sellable individual land titles were granted with project funds. This individualization of land rights made many more Piauí communities vulnerable to pressures to sell land to agribusiness, especially in the agrarian reform communities which previously had collective use rights on state land. The World Bank has not yet produced any report with a detailed narrative on this land titling work, but it seems unlikely that any serious attempt was made to explain the benefits of community titling to these communities. In similar situations, such as the Indigenous communities in Guatemala mentioned earlier, the individual titling of land and even a few families' sales to agribusiness weakens the social fabric of a community where relationships between households are an important source of support. Sales of land may often embolden intermediaries for agribusiness to harass and pressure additional community members to give up their land until community life becomes nonviable.¹⁹

Large-scale industrial agriculture continues to be promoted by companies, governments, and other institutions as a form of "progress" that should be welcomed as almost inevitable. Yet if we look at the countries with the highest levels of industrial agriculture such as the United States, we see high levels of inequality, poverty and rural depopulation where there were once thriving small towns and communities based on family-scale farming.²⁰ Organizations such as the Agrarian Trust are now promoting models like Community Land Trusts and Agrarian Commons as forms of community-based land rights which provide opportunities to young farmers and farmers of marginalized backgrounds to get access to land, both for their livelihoods and as part of growing movements to rebuild communities.²¹

These models provide farmers with long term land use rights that allow them to invest in their farms and build equity infrastructure and even soil improvements that can be sold to allow for transition to new farmers, but the land itself is not sold, and the rights are held by local community organizations. Without government support, many communities in the US lack the resources needed to set up these systems for aspiring or landless farmers. In other parts of the world, it would be much easier if existing systems of

community land tenure are not destroyed but given legal recognition and the support needed to deal with problems and threats. In places where the World Bank has individualized land titles, it should now fund programs to support communities to address the risks which they introduced through this kind of titling.

Further Actions Needed

The threats of continued environmental destruction, the displacement of rural communities and the loss of food sovereignty can be mitigated and even reversed by actions aimed at different parts of the problem by civil society and governments.

- Pressure must be applied to the companies and institutions such as TIAA and Harvard who are leading the global financialization of rural land and falsely portraying it as sustainable. TIAA and pension fund clients, faculty, students, and employees will be key actors in applying direct pressure and raising awareness of the problem. These companies should lead the way by reinvesting in rural communities without taking over land.
- Governments need to regulate the financial industry and investor ownership of farm and forest lands to prevent human rights violations and the displacement of Indigenous Peoples and local communities at home and abroad. Voluntary commitments by leading companies are inadequate because there are additional wealthy actors who will continue to grab land in spite of public pressure.²²
- Protecting existing land rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities and reestablishing them where they have been undermined, including through redistributive land reform must be a top-tier priority of governments and land governance funders, including development banks and UN agencies.
- Public policies in agriculture, environment, education, and health must focus on strengthening small-scale food producers and peasant/family farming communities in order to build food sovereignty for rural economies and the cities they support to achieve a more food-secure and equitable world.



Photo: Bruno Spadotto/Rede Social

Endnotes

- 1 HARVARD'S BILLION-DOLLAR FARMLAND FIASCO. Report by Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos, Grain: <https://www.social.org.br/en/pub/booklets-english/213-harvard-s-billion-dollar-farmland-fiasco>
- 2 TIAA and Harvard's Brazilian farm deals judged illegal as fires rage on their properties in the biodiverse Cerrado. Report by Associação de Advogados de Trabalhadores Rurais (AATR), Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos, Grain: <https://www.social.org.br/en/pub/booklets-english/253-tiaa-and-harvard-s-brazilian-farm-deals-judged-illegal>
- 3 Foreign pension funds and land grabbing in Brazil. Report by Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos, Grain: <https://www.social.org.br/en/pub/booklets-english/240-foreign-pension-funds-and-land-grabbing-in-brazil>
- 4 <https://www.actionaidusa.org/publications/land-rights-palm-oil-guatemala/>
- 5 Source: JICA, 2017
- 6 Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences - Mission to Brazil https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/news/WCMS_142253/lang--en/index.html
- 7 Transnational corporations and land speculation in Brazil. Report by Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos: <https://www.social.org.br/en/pub/booklets-english/210-transnational-corporations-and-land-speculation-in-brazil>
- 8 The names of community members were not included in the interviews to preserve their safety.
- 9 Statement on Farmland Speculation for International Biodiversity Day 2020: <https://www.social.org.br/index.php/artigos/artigos-english/243-statement-on-farmland-speculation-for-international-biodiversity-day-2020.html>
- 10 Invested in Exploitation? TIAA Tied To Deforestation And Displacement Of Farmers. Report by Action Aid, Friends of the Earth, Inclusive Development International, Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos: <https://www.social.org.br/en/pub/booklets-english/202-tiaa-tied-to-deforestation-and-displacement-of-farmers-environmentalists-claim-in-new-report>
- 11 Traditional communities are a category of rural peoples in Brazil defined in the Constitution as “culturally differentiated groups who recognize themselves as such, who have their own forms of social organization, occupy and use territories and natural resources as a condition for their cultural and social, religious, ancestral and economic reproduction, using knowledge, innovations and practices generated and passed on by tradition.”
- 12 A PILLAR OF GROWTH OR A REGULARIZATION OF LAND GRABS? WORLD BANK FUNDED LAND TITLING IN PIAUÍ, BRAZIL: <https://www.social.org.br/en/articles/articles-english/288-a-pillar-of-growth-or-a-regularization-of-land-grabs-world-bank-funded-land-titling-in-piaui-brazil>
- 13 The World Bank's land program in the State of Piauí, Brazil, is a license for land grabbing International Statement: <https://www.social.org.br/en/articles/articles-english/289-the-world-bank-s-land-program-in-the-state-of-piaui-brazil-is-a-license-for-land-grabbing-international-statement>
- 14 The Inspection Panel's report as well as the World Bank's response to the complaint are available here: <https://www.inspectionpanel.org/panel-cases/piaui-pillars-growth-and-social-inclusion-project-p129342>.
- 15 Letter sent by rural communities and local support organizations to the government of Piauí in June 2020.
- 16 A Armadilha do Crédito Fundiário do Banco Mundial: <https://www.social.org.br/pub/revistas-portugues/226-a-armadilha-do-cre-dito-fundia-rio-do-banco-mundial>
- 17 TIAA and Harvard's Brazilian farm deals judged illegal as fires rage on their properties in the biodiverse Cerrado: <https://www.social.org.br/en/pub/booklets-english/253-tiaa-and-harvard-s-brazilian-farm-deals-judged-illegal>
- 18 <https://www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/29894-harvard-spins-off-natural-resources-team-to-remain-partner>
- 19 https://www.tni.org/files/download/land-sov_series_briefs_-_ndeg1_alonso-fradejas_final.pdf
- 20 <https://www.actionaidusa.org/blog/tiaas-farms-up-close/>
- 21 <https://www.agrariantrust.org/initiatives/agrarian-commons/>
- 22 The UN Land Tenure Guidelines suggest that governments consider placing contextually appropriate ceilings on land ownership to prevent the creation of extreme and long-term land inequality.

Acknowledgements

Author: Maria Luisa Mendonça and Doug Hertzler

Design and layout: Jenna Farineau

Cover photo: Family farms in a traditional Piauí peasant community.

Photo: Mariella Paulino/Rede Social.