Finance and land grabbing: the impact of sustainability certifications on human rights compliance in Latin America

The purpose of this project is to shed light on the relationships between finance and human rights through case studies of land grabbing in Latin America seen from the angle of multi-stakeholder biofuels certifications. To what extent have finance-led regulations impacted actors’ behaviour in ways that have shaped human rights compliance and therefore contributed to change on the ground? To answer to this question, we will analyze the significance of local contexts in conditioning the perspectives of implementation of sustainable biofuels certifications.

In the academic literature, the relationship between finance and land grabbing has been mainly studied through the 2007-2008 food crisis, which created high price volatility and land speculation. However, land grabbing isn’t a new phenomenon and the impact of finance on land grabbing isn’t limited to speculation and investment. Resistance to large-scale land acquisitions has prompted various types of regulations either from the UN system1 or from multi-stakeholders initiatives (MSI). The latter, in which our project assumes finance plays a major role, responds to claims made by those struggling against large-scale acquisition by focusing on biofuels certifications and standardisations.

The various social and ecological consequences of biofuels production, including land grabbing, have indeed been widely analysed in the academic literature. Moreover, the multi-stakeholder certifications of biofuels2 legitimacy, their content, the power relations shaping and positioning them have been a topic of concern for scholars. In addition, their ability to generate change, have also been analysed in the context of the emergence of a “global integrated biofuel network”3. However, their impact in terms of changes at the local level has not been adequately studied either from a bottom-up perspective or through case studies. These lacunae are especially striking for the Latin American region. This is because the cycles of land grabbing and centuries of land reform in Latin America provide both a longitudinal dimension4 to the problem as well as the possibility for specific case studies on land grabbing dynamics.5

We argue that in order to assess the effective ability of biofuels certifications to generate (positive) change regarding land grabbing from a human rights perspective, one must also consider the local contexts in which their implementation take place. This perspective will allow us to highlight two gaps. First, there is a gap between finance’s impact on land grabbing (through speculation and investment) and the answer to this phenomenon by financial actors, which has mainly been limited through those biofuels certifications. Indeed, through analyses of power relations, we will show how these certifications are legitimizing land grabbing by imposing criteria they have to fulfil instead of putting into questions their own existence. Second, there is a gap between the so-called universal, scientific, and apolitical nature of private biofuel certifications and the various and complex local contexts in which those certifications have to be implemented.

1 For example the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of land, fisheries, and forests and the Principles for Agricultural Investment that Respect Rights, Livelihood and Resources (PRAI)
2 For example the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), Bonsucro, the Round Table for Responsible Soy (RTRS) and the Round Table on Sustainable Biomaterials (RSB)
3 (Fortin, 2011)
4 (Edelman & León, 2013)


