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Conference Report

Land governance: the LANDac conference in Utrecht, The Netherlands, 8–10 July 2015

The Dutch Land Academy (LANDac) organised an international conference on ‘Land Governance for Equitable and Sustainable Development’ on 8–10 July 2015. Two hundred and fifty participants from thirty-five countries were in attendance and discussed papers presented in forty thematic sessions. The organisers were overwhelmed by the demand for the conference topic. The conference was originally planned for two days, but due to the large number of abstract submissions, it was extended to become a three-day conference. In addition to the thematic sessions, there were keynote sessions, keynote debates, roundtables and book presentations. To complement the conference, a PhD summer school on land governance and sustainable development took place. LANDac was founded in 2010. From the beginning, LANDac has focused on the drivers and actors of land governance in developing countries and continues to search for ways of generating ‘equitable and sustainable development’.

In this context, the conference contributions focused on multiple forms of land-use changes and the underlying forms of governance. The broad perspective of the conference reached from large-scale investments in agricultural land, such as land grabbing, to the pressures placed on land through housing demands. To better understand these linkages, the role of national policies (Schoneveld and Zoomers, 2015) was emphasised by the conference organisation.

Subsequently, the focus was set on policy change and, hence, impediments to or factors facilitating this change. The LANDac research group sees policy change from more than just an analytical point of view. Its objective is to look for ways to further facilitate change towards an envisioned sustainable development. In order to look for further answers, the debate on dynamics in land-use policies in the global South was expanded towards research on changes and comparison of land-use policies in the global North. Hence, the 2015 conference aimed at connecting both discussions to identify the opportunities for mutual learning in dynamics of land-use policies.

Keynotes and keynote debates

In the opening session, Annelies Zoomers, Professor for International Development Studies at Utrecht University, reflected on the achievements of the Dutch land academy since its foundation six years ago. She emphasised three key lessons:

- it is important to understand the global land rush in its numbers, facts and quantitative aspects, but it is also important to understand its qualitative aspects, because land markets are under pressure from environmental constraints, urbanisation and multiple uses of land;
- it is important to understand that land governance is a result of previous policies. So, the contextualisation of land governance matters; and
- land issues cannot be regarded separately; rather, the coherence between various land uses and aspects of land governance is important.

She also highlighted the aims of the conference and the future challenges of land governance. Zoomers challenged the participants to consider land governance and land grabbing, in particular, not only in a rural or agricultural context, but also in the context of urban issues of land grabbing or, in a broader sense, the deprivation of access to land or, vice versa, land-use rights. In consequence of this presentation, it could be said that the conference connected with the field of urban planning.

The Dean of Geosciences at the University of Utrecht, Piet Hoekstra, explained in his opening statements – which served as a type of keynote – the environmental impacts of land grabbing in developing countries. From a physical geography perspective, he elaborated along two case studies the physical consequences of deforestation in riparian areas. The erosion at the sites increased, leading to a loss of fertile land while the sediments transported in the streams and rivers changed ecosystems downstream or in the delta regions. In his speech, he stressed the urgency of addressing land grabbing in developing countries.

Jun Borrás, Professor of Agrarian Studies, explained that two generations of research on land grabbing have emerged in the past decades: first, a broad analysis of who grabs land, where, for what purpose and under what circumstances; and second, a more in-depth understanding of the drivers behind land grabbing. He emphasised that land governance deals with complicated issues, such as overlapping spatial demands, changes in political economics (i.e. from large-scale to small-scale land grabbing) and socio-ecological and institutional interconnections. Borrás also bluntly identified the issue of land grabbing as existing between academic debate and activism.

The conference also included keynote debates. These sessions were not keynote presentations, but were instead podium discussions with experts and practitioners from the field. The sessions were very interactive. Many presentations raised lively and passionate debates between the audience and the discussants at the podium. An

example of this was the keynote debate that focused on the role of the private sector, where representatives from ABN AMRO bank, the Indonesian Oil Palm Community and Solagrow offered their perspectives on land and were challenged by the audience with critical questions. In the discussion, not only academic arguments but also conflicting opinions were exchanged. It became clear that the LANDac conference hosted not only academic participants, but also attracted non-governmental organisations, parties from the public and private sectors and activists. Frits van der Wal, representative of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that he saw in this mixture a catalytic function of the LANDac network.

Through the plurality of opinions and statements, the debate allowed the questioning of the role of land-use policies in the context of developing countries. The private-sector discussants stressed that their economic activities are strictly guided by or are in accordance with national policies or international standards. This could have been a starting point for a less normative discussion and an opportunity to point out the ability of policies, and especially property rights, to regulate land uses in the context of developing countries. From this perspective, the discussants' statements gave insights into the regulation of access to land and decision-making systems for resource management, i.e. the role of the public or civil society as well as local communities within a planning process. At this point, the consequences of ill-defined or weak institutions that contribute highly to undesired forms of land use (Geist et al., 2006) also could have been discussed, rather than the exchange of conflicting opinions that took place.

Sessions

The sessions were organised in ten major themes that ran throughout the conference. The themes covered governance issues and participation, environmental issues, food security, land tools and urban issues.

Right at the beginning of the session on urban issues of land governance there arose the need to clarify the meaning of 'governance'. Coming from a developmental perspective, land governance is understood by many of the participants as a form of good governance, meaning an adequate involvement of local population and actors in land transition processes. This, to some extent, contrasted with the notion of governance as an analytic instrument used to describe the interaction of market, state and actors' networks in land-use decisions, as pointed out by Fons van Overbeek (Wageningen University).

These two perspectives also led to differing expectations on the meaning of spatial planning in the discussion on urbanisation or land grabbing in developing countries. On the one side, spatial planning was blamed in many presentations for being too weak; on the other side, questions arose regarding the ability to perceive planning as a neutral system of formal and informal institutions.

Fabrice Banon (KIT Karlsruhe), for example, presented a case of land reassessment in the rapid urbanisation of Benin where he stressed the misalignment of land-use decisions and urban planning schemes. In this example, the role of governance as an instrument in the form of community participation became prominent when asking why urban growth did not align with planning. He showed that a local participative committee was acting independently and in its own interests instead of facilitating the implementation of public planning. As a result, decision processes were extended infinitely to secure income for the committee members. Hence, it was shown that urban planning could not reach its original aims, because public institutions are too weak and participatory instruments fail in the intended objective.

While the case of Benin stood for an analytical expression of governance, in the ensuing debate, the challenge of a normative notion of spatial planning became evident. The question was raised of how planning in general is meant to reach its primary objectives, or if planning is to be considered as a self-adjusting and more communicative process. This led to the further question of the comparability of national planning policies. Hartmann and Spit (2015), for example, suggest criteria to describe and evaluate planning policies, especially in a Northern context. They identify effectiveness, efficiency, fairness and democratic legitimacy as underlying principles. Looking at the case of Benin through this framework would be highly interesting in the sense of analysis, but also in regard to testing the robustness of the concept in a Southern context.

Special session on dynamics of land policies

Although most of the conference focused on developing countries, a special session on the dynamics of land policies and instruments in the developed (Northern) world was integrated into the programme. In a separate discussion, the findings of this session have been compared with the results of a session on urban land issues in developing countries in order to explore common ground.

In these special sessions, chaired by Thomas Hartmann and Tejo Spit (*Utrecht University*), presenters discussed when and how land policies in different countries change. Three scholars addressed the major shift in land policy in the Netherlands, the host country of LANDac, where a change from active land policy towards more facilitating land policy is taking place. Demetrio Muniz-Gielen (*Radboud University Nijmegen*) showed the scope of this change, while Sanne Holtslag-Broekhof (*Wageningen University*) elucidated on the attempts of the Dutch government to introduce land readjustment. Alexander Woestenburg (*Radboud University Nijmegen*) reflected on the new roles of the stakeholders in Dutch land policy and Fabian Wenner (*TU Munich*) discussed the effects of different instruments for land taxation. He compared and contrasted urbanisation patterns under the land value tax regime in Estonia with a

more common practice of property taxation in Latvia. On the subject of property rights, a contribution from Australia by John Sheehan (*UTS Sydney*) elaborated on the use of tradable development rights and rolling easements for the purpose of climate change adaptation. A case from Switzerland by Jean-David Gerber (*Bern University*) explained the issue of limiting building rights for second homes in the Alps. In regards to effects on land uses, Mark Oranje addressed land-policy issues in the context of South Africa. Mathias Jehling (*KIT Karlsruhe*) and Robert Hecht (*IOER Dresden*) analysed in their contribution the effects of introducing land-thrift policies on urban land consumption in Germany. Using a broader comparative perspective, Jana Bovev (*UFZ Leipzig*) presented an assessment of land policies in various European countries. She analysed how different national land policies implement sustainable land management. Looking into the future development of European planning policies, Fabian Thiel (*Frankfurt University of Applied Science*) elaborated on the effects of Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) on national land policies, particularly the investment of foreign real-estate developers and how TTIP contradicts national law and the autonomy of municipal planning. The juxtaposition of all these different approaches expresses the great variety of dynamics in land policies.

Debate on land policies

In a final debate on urban land-use policies, the question was raised of a synthesis of Northern and Southern approaches. It became obvious that while research in a developed country's context should emphasise formal institutions, such as policies and property rights, an analysis on land governance in developing countries must acknowledge a system of weak institutions and concentrate on powerful actors. The juxtaposition of these two perspectives showed that external driving forces on land governance deserve a closer look in both contexts, especially as forces beyond the capabilities of local planning or land-use policies are also increasingly influenced by conditions of land governance globalisation in Europe.

Ultimately, the conference in Utrecht was a lively and passionate exchange on the issues of land governance. The conference managed to bring together not only the academic and activist debate on land grabbing, but also elicited discussions on land policies in developing countries and the developed world. This exchange did not lead to final conclusions (that is a task for a future research project), but it did help to identify issues for future conferences and workshops on land governance, such as the role of spatial planning and the differences and similarities between developed and developing countries. In conclusion, the high demand and the lively discussions at the LANDac conference, as well as the issues raised, serve as a mandate and an obligation to organise follow-up events.

References

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