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Conference Report

LANDac, International Land Governance Conference 2016, 30 June–1 July, Utrecht, the Netherlands

The Dutch Land Academy (the Netherlands Academy on Land Governance for Equitable and Sustainable Development – LANDac) organised its annual conference on Land Governance in the Context of Urbanisation and Climate Change: Linking the Rural and Urban' on 30 June–1 July 2016. A hundred and sixty participants – who presented studies originating from 33 countries – attended the conference and discussed papers in twenty thematic sessions. Additionally, the conference had keynotes, panel discussions and special sessions (documentary viewing, film project preview, societally oriented events and a subsequent PhD summer school). With its conference theme – linking the rural and the urban – LANDac changes orientation from a purely rural focus towards inclusion of the urban landscape. LANDac previously focused on land grabbing, rural development and agricultural business, but now, as Annelies Zoomers (chair of LANDac, *Utrecht University*) explained in the welcome session, urbanisation seems inevitable in the context of land governance. She emphasised the sudden urbanisation of rural areas when land use is rezoned to urban, and vice versa when political mood changes, creating uncertainty for communities on the fringe. She also addressed the exclusive nature of cities, pushing out those who cannot keep up with mobilisation, digitalisation and rising costs of living, subsequently creating (more) inequality. The conference aimed to identify dynamics of urban–rural linkages to establish the LANDac research agenda for the upcoming years.

Keynotes

During the conference several keynotes were given. George Payne (housing and urban development consultant in the UK) opened with a keynote entitled 'Land governance in interesting times!'. He focused on peri-urban areas and pragmatic solutions to land tenure. According to Payne, rules are too complicated and change too often according to rezoning as rural or urban. Traditional (customary) law and statutory law meet in

these areas, creating a non-understandable legal plurality. He encouraged governments to invest in (and promote) different tenure options, ‘as land ownership is fine by some, but a burden for young, elderly and poor’.

The next set of keynotes addressed the state of affairs in land governance in several countries and continents. João Carrilho (former vice-minister of agriculture, *government of Mozambique*) focused on Mozambique and Africa in general, Roberto Rocco (*TU Delft*) focused on Brazil and Latin America, and Malovika Pawar (Indian Administrative Service, *Utrecht University*) focused on India and Asia. The brief pitches of each of the speakers provided the opportunity to get acquainted with the different contexts and set the scene for the remainder of the conference. In all the pitches the interrelatedness and interdependency of rural and urban landscapes was at the forefront, either to ‘find new paradigms to adapt to a new world of compressed space–time’ (Carrilho), to ‘bridge the social-spatial divide in the face of capitalism’ (Rocco), or to ‘acquire farmland fairly and with just compensation’ (Pawar).

On the second day, Theo de Jager (*Pan-African Farmers’ Organisation, South African Confederation of Agricultural Unions*) and Jean du Plessis (*UN-Habitat*) each gave a policy-oriented keynote speech. De Jager took a stance for small towns in South Africa, a link between urban (large cities) and rural areas. Small towns are hubs in the agricultural value chain and create communities, but to keep the value chain, volume is needed. As such, ‘we should abandon the romanticising of smallholder farming ... and create communities fit for the world market’. Du Plessis focused on the Sustainable Development Goals to promote land tenure. He focused on land rights and human rights, thereby emphasising flexibility towards tenure deeds. He gave the example of Cairo, where people have tenure rights and land deeds, but keep their electricity bills as proof of their right to stay. In his words, ‘we need to recognise the presence of people’, emphasising the difference between institutional solutions to land rights (deeds) and the needs of individual households.

Sessions

The sessions were organised as a collection of different panels, covering Habitat III, megacities, violent urbanisation, climate change and property rights, rural urbanisation, peri-urban dynamics, urban elites, scaling, infrastructure development, land conflicts, land administration, food security and communal land rights. Each of the panels connected to the general theme of rural–urban linkages, but through their own lens. We highlight two of the panels below.

Double session on property rights and climate change

Two sessions highlighted the climate change theme of the conference, with a special focus on the aspect of property rights. The sessions were organised by Fennie van Straalen, Thomas Hartmann, Michelle Linden-Nuijten and Murtah Read (*Utrecht University*). All speakers in the sessions emphasised the differences of assessment on the global or the local scale. Although solutions to climate change might look positive at the global or institutional level, on the household level the impact is more eminent. Especially poor households have a low adaptive capacity and are vulnerable to dealing with institutional solutions to climate change. In the first session, Elis Saputra (*Utrecht University, Universitas Gadjah Mada*) focused on land subsidence in Indonesia. Land subsidence in Indonesia is assessed at the institutional level, but assessment on the household level is still lacking. As such, household vulnerability and adaptive capacity are not taken into account, leading to loss of livelihood. Sara Vigil (*University of Liège, Erasmus University Rotterdam*) focused on land grabbing under the umbrella of climate change and climate displacement. She highlighted how climate change is used as justification for land grabbing. She emphasised how an agricultural shift towards bio-fuel crops affects the livelihoods of farmers and could lead to land grabbing and *in situ* displacement. Anna Hajdu and Oane Visser (*Erasmus University Rotterdam*) focused on property structures of farmland and their resilience in the face of climate risks. They concluded that the type of farming is more important than the scale of farming. Also they concluded that foreign investment (in Romania up to 40 per cent of farmland) is at risk due to a lack of willingness to invest in proper irrigation systems.

The second session discussed the Garuda project in Indonesia with Alex Hekman (*Sweco*), Meine Pieter van Dijk (*UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education*) and Christa Nooy (*Both Ends*). The Garuda project comprises the construction of a giant sea wall to protect the sinking city of Jakarta from rising sea levels. Land subsidence triggered by natural compaction of the sediment and groundwater extraction causes Jakarta to sink up to 25 cm annually. To finance the sea wall, an iconic waterfront city – in the shape of the national garuda bird – will be constructed. The project is not undisputed. Both Alex Hekman and Meine Pieter van Dijk emphasised the need to solve the problem of land subsidence, otherwise both Jakarta and the sea wall will keep sinking. However, Alex Hekman also stressed the importance of the Garuda project as the most efficient alternative to dealing with climate change (other alternatives being evacuating Jakarta or creating offshore water storage). Christa Nooy expressed the concerns of local inhabitants of Jakarta and the (uneven) balance between (Dutch) economic interests and local social and environmental rights. She stressed the importance of community consultation and awareness of loss of livelihood. Although the speakers could not agree on the need for the large-scale Garuda project as a solution to Jakarta's problems, all speakers agreed on the need to deal with land subsidence to protect Jakarta and its inhabitants.

Triple session on infrastructure development and displacement

A considerable share of sessions was dedicated to discussing a new and upcoming topic of interest within the LANDac community; that is, large-scale investment in (urban) infrastructure, and the consequences of such mega-projects for local stakeholders. A panel titled ‘Infrastructure and displacement: towards inclusive governance for infrastructure development?’ was organised and chaired by Kei Otsuki, Murtah Read and Patrick Witte (*Utrecht University*). The main aim of the panel was to evaluate the contribution of infrastructure development to inclusive, local development. The panel covered a variety of contributions on urban and rural infrastructure projects throughout the world, in the contexts of both developing and developed countries. The panel was structured along three sequential sessions, which covered the topics of (1) inclusive and fair infrastructure development, (2) domestic and foreign capital investment in rural infrastructure projects, and (3) the sustainability and inclusivity potential of mega-projects.

The debate in the first session centred on the role of international donor organisations as important stakeholders in vulnerable natural and political/institutional climates. Murtah Read (*Utrecht University*) stressed that in his case study of Beira (Mozambique), the root cause of hindrances to sustainable urbanisation often lies with the interventions of external actors, which are technical and problem-based, instead of locally based and context-sensitively informed. In contrast, Bernardo Almeida (*Leiden University*) was more favourable towards the position of donor organisations in his case study of the former Indonesian colony of Timor Leste. Because they are subject to international safeguard mechanisms, they are often more reliable in comparison with state institutions in uncertain legal contexts. Overall, the lack of a strong legal framework for land acquisition in developing countries is seen as problematic regarding the reliable implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects.

The second session elaborated on the issue of land acquisition for mega-project development by zooming in on the interesting relation between legal and social aspects of ‘just’ land acquisition. The contribution of Meine Pieter van Dijk particularly provoked much discussion on the case of Chinese land grabbing in African countries. In the wake of his presentation it was observed that in developing countries attention is slowly shifting from a rural to an urban and peri-urban context, and, quite remarkably, from North–South cooperation to South–South cooperation. Although the distinction between facts and reality sometimes seems to be a bit blurred in using secondary data from developing countries, it appears that these countries are recently favouring cooperation with China over cooperation with European partners for reasons of efficiency and timeliness of implementation.

In the final session, economic and social impacts of infrastructure development were discussed as two sides of the same coin. As argued by Delphine (*Utrecht University*) in discussing the case of the Chinese Benteng community in Tangerang (Indonesia),

while economic growth and climate resilience are often put forward as the main rationales behind mega-project development, attention to displacement and social justice seems to be lagging behind. In particular, in many cases the local population plays second fiddle to both state and private stakeholders, there is a lack of understanding of community awareness, and community participation is not commonly practised. This is in line with the conclusions in the previous sessions on technical expertise versus locally based, context-sensitive information, and legal versus social aspects of 'just' land acquisition. It also points to the more general conclusion of this panel, which stresses the importance of path-dependent development of local communities, and the importance of sensitivity towards the local cultural and institutional context in implementing large-scale infrastructure projects.

Closing debate on rural–urban linkages

During the conference the dynamics of scale were omnipresent; globalisation versus localisation, institutional or household-level assessment, mega-projects versus community awareness and urban–rural uncertainties. Additionally, the market economy and its effects on development, communities and urbanisation were discussed. These dynamics all lead to the question of what urban–rural symbioses could look like. Although the conference opened up the discussion, the question is not nearly answered. Still, LANDac is awaiting a bright future as Reina Buijs (deputy director general, International Cooperation, *Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs*) announced support for the second phase of LANDac during the conference opening. She urged the academic community to focus on concrete actions to break down the wall between the urban and rural contexts. As such, Annelies Zoomers, in the closing plenary, highlighted awareness of rural–urban linkages and the momentum this creates, and outlined the first actions for the new LANDac agenda: bring more urban planners into LANDac debates, focus on political analysis, match law with culture and create space for refugees and displaced people.