Urban Studies

Land in urban debates: Unpacking the grab–development dichotomy

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Abstract

On the heels of the rural 'land grab' debate, the ongoing urban transition combined with large-scale urban infrastructure investments and land scarcity forces us to also pay more attention to issues of land in urban discussions. Yet how can we conceptualise land-related problems in order to connect and integrate rural and urban debates in overarching discussions of development? In this commentary, we argue for moving beyond the directly visible outcomes and presumed 'culprits' of land investments by critically analysing indirect and long-term effects of land acquisitions on people's livelihoods as well as the differentiation of these effects for different actors. We propose three specific arguments to disentangle the grab–development dichotomy: 1) placing a focus on the sequential chain of effects of displacement; 2) paying more attention to the ambivalent roles and contradictory interests of different actors; and 3) taking the three-dimensional aspects of land development into account.

Keywords

development, displacement, exclusion, gentrification, land grab, land investments, land use, poverty, redevelopment, regeneration

摘要

在农村"抢地"争论之后，正在进行的城市转型与大规模的城市基础设施投资和土地稀缺相结合，迫使我们在有关城市的讨论中更加关注土地问题。然而，我们如何将与土地有关的问题概念化，以便将农村和城市的辩论联系起来，并将两者整合到关于发展的总体讨论中呢？在这篇评论中，我们主张批判性地分析土地征用对人们生计的间接和长期影响，以及对不同参与者而言此等影响的区别，从而超越直接可见的结果以及一般人想当然地认为的土地投资的"罪恶"。我们提出了三个具体的论点，来解开"抢地-发展"的二分法迷思：1）把重点放在拆迁的连续影响链上；2）更加关注不同参与者的矛盾角色和矛盾利益；3）考虑土地开发的三个维度。

关键词

发展、拆迁、排斥、绅士化、抢地、土地投资、土地使用、贫困、再开发、再生

Introduction

SDG 11 and the New Urban Agenda have re-energised debates on how to achieve an inclusive and sustainable urban transition in the global South. However, with a focus on service delivery, informality, urban sprawl and problems of social exclusion, 'land' is only discussed in the margins.[1] This may relate to academia's persistent failure – despite ongoing discussions on planetary urbanisation (Brenner, 2018; Brenner and Schmid, 2014; Jazeel, 2018; Reddy, 2018) – to conceptualise the urban and the rural in unison. In the rural sphere, discussions focus more explicitly on the negative consequences of large-scale land acquisitions such as direct and indirect displacement, enclosure of the commons and food insecurity (Borras and Franco, 2013; Cotula et al., 2009; De Schutter, 2009; Wolford et al., 2013). In contrast, urban land acquisition is often viewed as a process of privatisation and is generally seen as an indispensable part of the urban consumption economy. When studying the impacts of large-scale land acquisitions, such as those involving big food and biofuel corporations, academic discussions tend to zero-in on the negative consequences of rural land use change for smallholders and other local populations; here a multinational agribusiness might be considered a powerful and 'known enemy'. In stark contrast, the multitude of hardly traceable financial players strategising in urban real estate deals often remain veiled, with their influences opaque; a mosaic of state and privately-owned plots may be converted into large commercial centres or infrastructure projects with significant consequences, yet discussions remain embedded in modernisation debates and the aspired development of the city (as, for example, in McGuirck, 2014). Indeed, a shopping mall chain owned by a financial giant known for its banks and pharmacies is a less clear-cut land-grab actor. Yet for urban dwellers, the disappearance of open space or vacant lots is just as much a form of grab as is the dispossession of agricultural plots from small-scale farmers.

In order to overcome the limited conceptualisation that the urban sphere is a bounded and isolated entity, we need to unpack the dichotomy that presents urban land investments as 'development' and rural land investments as 'grabs'. To do so, we extensively compared both rural and urban land debates to demonstrate that rural–urban land issues are entangled because rural land grabs are complemented by city-making strategies (Steel et al., 2017; Zoomers et al., 2017). Densification in the downtown and simultaneous or subsequent urban development in the periphery both result in dispossession and displacement, albeit on two frontiers. We therefore follow Mbiba (2017: 214), who observes that, 'land grabbing should not be about size but about essence'. So, what is the essence of 'land grabbing' in different settings? And how can we conceptualise land-related problems in order to connect and integrate rural and urban debates in overarching discussions of development? When unpacking the grab–development dichotomy – and without attempting to morally weight the different examples of land acquisition – it is important to understand how political agendas and different modalities and realities of exclusion illustrate grabbing in some instances but are

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seen as development in others. While it is clear that many actors propose land investments for the sake of 'development', we explore in more detail that even the most well-intentioned land investments can become opportunities for 'land grabbing'. Hence, the dividing line between 'grab' and 'development' is far from clear.

In this commentary, we propose three avenues for disentangling the grab–development dichotomy. First, we argue that while not all land investments lead to direct displacement, some form of indirect displacement is often observable over time. As such, the sequential chain of post-investment effects needs to be unpacked. Second, no clear assessment of current land investments exists; a deeper investigation into the often-complicated set of actors, their changing roles and contradictory interests, is needed. Finally, the three-dimensional consequences of land development are important; there remains a need to assess features of real estate projects such as the potential values of soil and the spaces above and underneath in their imagined future uses. Through these three lenses we critically articulate how a particular focus on a few prominent urban dynamics can bring in new arguments, cross-fertilise the discussions and span the rural–urban divide.

Displacement chains

Displacement and dispossession of sitting land users lie at the foundation of most rural land grab discussions. Although many scholars have focused on the everyday effects of displacement on people's livelihoods (German et al., 2013; Kaag and Zoomers, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2017; Zoomers and Otsuki, 2017), compensation issues (German et al., 2013; Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010) and the need to consult with local communities to develop new modalities for benefit sharing (Otsuki et al., 2017; Vermeulen and

Cotula, 2010), the dynamics of displacement itself are often not the focus of scholarly or conceptual attention. To further unpack the grab–development dichotomy, we need to shed more light on displacement, dispossession and the sequential chain of effects. This also implies a renewed engagement with the most common theoretical framings of land grabs and displacement, such as accumulation by dispossession, gentrification, commodification and enclosure of the commons. The high diversity of displacement mechanisms, due to a myriad of property rights and land use arrangements, is typical of informal urban settlements, and is often, but not exclusively, found in the global South (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018). These mechanisms are further diversified by the 'rurban' character of many current land investments. Although traditionally dubbed the 'commodification of urban land and resources' and now often caught under the umbrella of the 'enclosure of the (urban) commons', the same factors are at play: a transfer of de facto rights from urban dwellers to more powerful actors in order to make space ready for lucrative market exchange. Given recent debates surrounding these mechanisms and their conceptualisations (Gillespie, 2016; Jeffrey et al., 2012; Leitner and Sheppard, 2018; Mbiba, 2017), the various modalities of direct displacement as well as more indirect processes of exclusion require new classifications.

First, direct physical displacement is undeniably a main issue in any grab or development discussion, and we can observe this most clearly in instances of slum clearance and massive rural land grabbing. A variety of mechanisms is used to expel existing populations. The most obvious ones are changes in land tenure or the enforcement of formal land tenure arrangements (such as states' use of eminent domain) in order to commodify urban land. In addition, forced eviction and expropriation are common

ways used to empty the land. Describing the situation in Accra, Ghana, Gillespie (2016) identifies three physical-legal mechanisms that were employed to expel poor and informal inhabitants from urban areas destined for development: 1) the privatisation of communal land for elite development projects; 2) the eviction and displacement of squatters from the city centre; and 3) the cleansing of street hawkers from the city's public spaces. To attract private developers and tourists, the latter mechanism featured a 'decongestion exercise' to remove hawkers and prevent other 'chaotic' space uses. A strong aesthetics narrative, in line with the revanchist 'dirt-and-disorder' narratives employed in many cities (Ghertner, 2015), accompanied the mechanism. Such examples have also been attributed to Latin American cities (Bromley and Mackie, 2009; Crossa, 2009; Steel, 2012; Swanson, 2007).

Second, indirect and less straightforward forms of displacement can occur as part of a deliberate policy or as an unintended effect of such a policy. These processes are less visible and the actors less clearly defined. As Davidson (2011) argues, we should not see displacement as a simple process of eviction to another place, but rather in a wider sense. Debates on these issues are often separated into 'rural' and 'urban', but there are interesting parallels. In inner cities, indirect forms of displacement are addressed in the gentrification debate (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009; Smith, 1987, 1996). For example, rising land and property values increasingly make these objects financially unattainable for the poor; through the pre-emptive exclusion of new poor inhabitants, exclusionary displacement occurs (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009); displacement of pre-existing poor populations also results from increasing ground rent and property taxes. In addition, indirect cultural or social exclusion occurs through enclavisation (Jeffrey et al., 2012; Steel et al., 2017) as well as a targeted change in urban services

that can hasten displacement (e.g. specialised shops and restaurants to attract people with specific lifestyles; Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009). Indeed, as debates on gentrification have diversified and started to include the specific experiences of people in the global South, it is clear that broader exclusionary processes, such as the growth of high-end commercial development, are an important part of global gentrifications (Lees et al., 2014; see also Steel et al., 2017). Displacement, not only a spatial or physical event, is also a social and symbolic process (Davidson, 2011). Similarly, enclosure entails more than just walls (Jeffrey et al., 2012). However, some forms of indirect exclusion do not fit the gentrification concept, even though they are still relevant for urban land debate. For example, when infrastructure projects and other fixed structures are put in place in the rural–urban fringe, mobile populations such as pastoralist groups and temporarily-mobile populations (often the most vulnerable) can no longer use the land or the underground resources. This is a common complaint with regard to the construction of hydroelectric power plants that deny people access not only to land but also to ground water (e.g. Ioris, 2007). Here the term 'enclosure of the commons' can be used in its traditional sense of rural commons or primary resources being enclosed by privatising, individualising and capitalist developments, often deriving from the urban area. Similar exclusions occur for example when new land is reclaimed from the sea, as a consequence of which fishers lose their livelihoods. Hence we can see a continuum of indirect exclusionary effects across the rural–urban spectrum.

Third, some authors have pointed out the voluntary nature of specific instances of 'displacement' and the complexity of differences between voluntary and involuntary displacement. Holm and Schulz (2018) argue that in the case of urban gentrification, relocation

decisions are rarely mono-causal, and that binary categorisations of 'voluntary' or 'involuntary' relocation are problematic. Leitner and Sheppard (2018) show that displacement in Jakarta in some cases has elements of choice (though within structural constraints) and may provide accumulation opportunities for specific urban dwellers. Lyall (2017) indicates that during the resettlement of rural dwellers from oil-rich areas to urban-like settlements, called 'Millennium Cities' in Ecuador, communities consented to their own relocation. Without explaining away this consent as cognitive dissonance or lack of real participation, the author shows that the voluntary relocation was driven by people's historically created urban aspirations (although the effects of the relocation were equally problematic). We can cautiously hypothesise that current rural–urban land grabs accompanied by urban aspirations have a higher tendency to blur the voluntary versus involuntary dualism (see also Nguyen et al., 2017; Zoomers et al., 2017).

Fourth, framing the concept of displacement in the theoretical discussions of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003), Mbiba (2017) argues that another indirect exclusionary effect occurs through a select group of actors who monopolise or 'grab' huge ground rents from public or common land without any redistribution mechanisms. The change of land use that occurs when real estate or infrastructural works are developed not only drives up land values in and around the developed area, but such interventions also define who can share in the benefits of rising land prices (Smith, 1996). Following Smolka (2013: 6), we see that investments in urban infrastructure and services usually elicit 'three types of land use change (land use conversion; higher densities, footprints, or other building norms; and zoning regulations) that constitute important sources of windfalls for well-placed landowners'. Such value increases can be part of deliberate

policies, but often they are the unintended outcome of other interventions. So, in order to define whether we can talk about 'land grab' or long-term 'development' for the public benefit, we need to first assess who benefits from land use change and second, if the state is the main beneficiary, how the distribution of public earnings is established.

To conclude, as Leitner and Sheppard (2018) argue, we need to think through Harvey's (2003) concept of accumulation by dispossession in more contextually-adapted ways. Rather than taking dispossession or forced spatial displacement as an inevitable effect of the enclosure of the commons, multiple types of accumulation, contestation and displacement might be involved (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018). We have made a start by classifying types of displacement across the rural–urban spectrum. In addition, multiple types of direct displacement and indirect or pressured (though sometimes 'voluntary') displacement and exclusion are often intertwined and can evolve over time into so-called displacement chains. For example, 'new city' projects planned and executed in Africa's rural–urban fringe cause a variety of displacement sequences and exclusionary effects (although there are cases where no displacement has occurred at all (Van Noorloos and Kloosterboer, 2018). Inner-city restructuring programmes in Addis Ababa and Luanda, for example, have led to the resettlement of displaced inhabitants into peripheral, large-scale housing complexes (Croese, 2017; Planel and Bridonneau, 2017; Yntiso, 2008). In turn, such resettlements can potentially displace existing peri-urban land users. At the same time, these land users are not passive victims of forced evictions or other forms of displacement. The city of Khartoum, for instance, has a long history of relocating internally-displaced people into appropriate residential housing and newly planned areas (Abdelmoneium, 2016). Over the

years, it was observed that some of these displaced families stay in the newly allocated area for just a couple of months and then move on again by renting or occupying new places in more central parts of the city – at least until they are relocated again (Steel and Abukashawa, 2018). These kinds of dynamics set in motion a displacement chain that complicates a clear identification of the possible 'culprits'. This brings us to our second avenue needed to disentangle the grab–development dichotomy: a look at the often-complicated set of actors, their changing roles and contradictory interests.

Ambivalent actors

In the rural sphere, initial discussions on the global land rush focused on private and often foreign entities as the main actors in large-scale land investments. Over recent years, however, scholars have shown the diversity of actors involved in rural land acquisitions (Cotula, 2011; German et al., 2013; O'Brien and the Kenya Land Alliance, 2011; Schoneveld et al., 2011). Indeed, land investments always involve configurations of actors who are embedded within unequal power relations and at odds with contradictory interests. New and unexpected actors have entered the rural as well as the urban land markets and scholars have become more aware of the varied interests and actions of existing agents (Doshi, 2013; Leitner and Sheppard, 2018; Levien, 2012). In place of an extensive overview of all possible actors, we focus instead on the ambivalent roles of three specific groups usually not regarded as drivers of land grabbing or displacement: the state, universities and advocacy groups. Addressing their ambivalent involvements underscores our argument: making actor categorisations or defining land change outcomes only in terms of winners and losers is not conducive to overcoming the grab–development dichotomy.

As scholars point out, there is a lack of understanding or a simplification of the hybrid mix of actors (and their fluid roles) involved in development planning, policies and implementation as well as the diversity of actors on the demand side (for housing or commercial spaces). For example, in his case study of Accra, Ghana, Gillespie (2016) stresses that contrary to most cities, it is not the private sector in Accra but the entrepreneurial state that is the principal actor in the grabbing of urban land for accumulation purposes. He describes the confusing roles of state institutions, showing how the legacy of colonial governance has resulted in political intricacies and power inequalities between the national state and the capital city. The important and multiple role of the state in urban land acquisitions and development is also clear in cities across Asia. The conversion of peri-urban land into high-value urban investment land is a quick and attractive way for city governments to earn revenue, hence they become active peri-urban real estate developers (Goldman, 2011). In Indonesia, Leitner and Sheppard (2018) discuss how land commodification and contestations through commoning are mutually constitutive processes. Arguing that enclosure does not necessarily entail displacement and that displacement does not necessarily entail dispossession, they show the various and ambivalent interactions between the state, developers and low-income *kampung*, or slum, residents. Some displacements are motivated by eminent domain principles, while others are convincingly understood as evictions. In most cases, *kampung* residents decide to 'take the money and run', but the chain effects differ. Some residents invest windfall profits in a new plot; others occupy land in the periphery and organise their livelihoods in non-capitalist ways. Instead of accumulation by dispossession, Leitner and Sheppard (2018) use the concept of contested accumulations through displacement

to stress grab–development complexities and ambivalences.

In Africa's new cities and peri-urban projects, scholars show in a similar vein how the role of the state can vary from being a mere land broker to acting outright as an urban developer (Cain, 2014; Murray, 2015; Watson, 2013). As in Latin America, most Asian and African real estate and urban infrastructure projects are designed with the particular goal in mind of inducing land speculation processes. Yet, different from Latin America, these projects are sometimes no more than 'utopian' visions of what could be developed. They are primarily created to attract attention and to spread a world city image, rather than being designed as a way to generate money for the public good (Goldman, 2011; Steel et al., 2017; Watson, 2013). Case studies demonstrate how such plans often result in passive or 'frozen' development projects (Cirolia, 2014; De Boeck, 2011, 2014; Smith, 2017; Watson, 2013). For example, this occurs when land remains empty for longer periods of time or when land developments are only envisioned on paper (Van Noorloos and Kloosterboer, 2018), potentially contributing to dysfunctional or immobilised cities in which people are displaced or relocated 'for nothing' as no concrete outcome is achieved. It might also result in informal dynamics in which displaced inhabitants reclaim their land and resources or in cases where the soil of the 'empty land' is excavated and used for construction projects elsewhere. Based on these examples, the ambivalence of such state actors lies in the fact that they stimulate accumulation by displacement without being able to steer process outcomes.

Apart from a strikingly active role of national and local state institutions in what could be called 'land extractivism', there are other relatively new actors such as universities that increasingly participate in land development projects involving grabbing and displacement. Sherry (2005: 13) points to the ambivalence of actors with a special responsibility for the public good when she states that '[u]niversities almost everywhere are placed in critical positions as they actively develop land themselves, and thus can be seen as agents of urban change–to both the benefit and the detriment of the city'. Whereas the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City protected university premises from any government intervention that intended to commercially develop the land (Sherry, 2005), in Quito, Ecuador, the University of the Americas actively participated in a lucrative land deal by converting a 'worthless' gorge into Ekopark, a commercial centre that includes the university premises.[2] Sherry (2005) and others have noted that land development consortia attempt to involve universities as their participation enables the commercial development of leftover spaces and wastelands using technologically innovative solutions. In densifying cities, physically degraded areas – ravines, steep hillsides, river beddings (the zones of disamenity in the model of Griffin and Ford, 1980) – tend to be more centrally located than peri-urban rural land. Analytically speaking, these zones are neither urban nor rural. Geographically unstable grounds can only be developed with sound technological knowledge and with the approval of local authorities. The stakes are high as the development of geographical barriers is often considered to be an improvement for enhanced city connectivity. Moreover, leftover soil, a by-product of excavation, generates high windfalls for all involved. In addition, it allows universities to train students in realistic assignments through applied research. However, since degraded inner-city zones are usually characterised by informal settlements, techno-based land grabs are paired with displacement, whether or not these are declared as eminent domain (cf. Leitner and Sheppard, 2018).

Gillespie (2016) demystifies the role of another actor in urban development processes: pro-poor advocacy groups. Again, these prove more paradoxical than often acknowledged. While groups such as Slum/ Shack Dwellers International are sometimes able to avert forced displacements, at other times they actively cooperate with the government to enforce displacements in one location to get more leverage in other negotiations. Such ambivalent roles need to be taken into account to understand the trade-offs and multiplicity of interests (including people's good intentions for the greater good) that help us to more accurately conceptualise urban land developments. In many of these urban land developments, state institutions, universities and civil society actors have become key entrepreneurial actors that contribute as much to grabbing and exclusivist land development as they do to stimulating local development or access to resources.

Three-dimensional grabbing

The hybrid character of the relations between land grabbers, urban development actors and the subjects of these developments provoked us to complicate the physical dimensions and scales of land grabs and urban development. We argue that more attention is needed for the three-dimensional characteristics of land development to better assess land investments and outcomes by including the potential values of space and resources above and underneath the soil in their imagined future uses (see also Gillespie, 2016; Mbiba, 2017; Zoomers et al., 2017).

Urbanisation is characterised by a double spatial dynamic. On one hand, low density sprawl absorbs peri-urban agricultural lands or protected natural areas. This is what the land grab debate focuses on most. On the other hand, inner-city areas densify through the verticalisation of the city (Borsdorf et al.,

2007; O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela, 2013), forcing us to rethink land-use and land-conversion conceptualisations in more than two dimensions (Harris, 2015). Whereas urban sprawl is usually conceptualised as a form of land use change that deprives rural populations of their livelihoods, densification in central urban areas is often regarded to be a space-saving, and hence more sustainable, form of urban development. Promoted by the New Urban Agenda and SDG11, densification and compact city models are promoted in global policy circles, notwithstanding the possible gentrification risks (Graham and Hewitt, 2013).

To be sure, both massive agribusiness land grabbing and urban real estate investments involve land as a resource, precisely because land as a surface or as a material can be converted into a multi-layered set of resources located on top of or below terra firma. In the rural land debate, analyses of the struggles over land are implicitly connected to what's *in* the land (e.g. fertile soil, minerals, oil and water sources). In line with Graham and Hewitt's (2013) attention on the 'politics of urban air', we argue that achieving a better understanding of urban transformation processes needs to start with an analysis of investments, land-use conversion and governance processes that sees land as a resource which enables the conversion of 'everything on top or underneath of that land'. To be sure, many urban struggles relate to the chain effects set in motion by the *potential* development possibilities on top of or below the ground. As both the use and exchange value of urban land are determined by the *potential* value of the geographical location, more than by any actual characteristics, such imagined developments related to land – everything on top as well as below the surface – deserve more attention.

If we broaden the concept of land as a two-dimensional surface towards what

Graham and Hewitt (2013: 74) call volumetric urbanism, we allow a more holistic focus on space in its three-dimensional possibilities of grab and development as well as their socio-political consequences. One important and new way of viewing 'grab' is offered by Cwerner (2006) in the analysis of the 'grab' of air in the areas of São Paulo, Brazil, where the urban rich who can afford to use urban air travel as an alternative to ground-based traffic and the everyday traffic jams have created privatised air corridors between their residential enclaves and their working spaces. Taking the three-dimensional possibilities of space as a starting point, we are able to envision the ways in which actors use a 'piece of soil' for development and for purposes of accumulation. The concept of a three-dimensional space grab thus captures the ways in which 'land' is vertically replicated through the creation of new surfaces and infrastructures above and in the ground (e.g. subways, fly-overs and cable cars). The layered surfaces of buildings in cities directly influence open space ratios and the availability of urban commons, such as access to daylight and access to a panorama; these aspects are clearly related to people's health and well-being (Graham and Hewitt, 2013).

The increasing densification of city centres, driven by real estate developers and mixed consortia, can then be understood as a form of three-dimensional grabbing that enables some residents to live more comfortable lives elevated above the dirty and cramped street level, while high-rises block other residents' access to fresh air, views and daylight (Dohnke and Hölzl, 2015). Such mechanisms are comparable to the mechanisms we know from rural land grabs, where massive soy bean or flower plantations deprive surrounding communities of access to fresh water (Boelens et al., 2011). In the case of vertical grabbing, rights that are attributed to the use of layered surfaces on top of the land are often disconnected from land ownership rights, for example in ground lease constructions. For that reason, the 'traditional' land grab notion is insufficient for urban settings as it does not adequately capture the legal complexities of three-dimensional space use in cities. The notion of three-dimensional grabs enables us to assess features of investment projects that connect horizontal to vertical enclosures and that include the potential values of the spaces above and underneath the soil in its imagined future uses. Discussing the three-dimensional aspects of land development as forms of grabbing deepens the analysis of the ambivalent long-term implications of land use change.

Conclusion: The grab–development dichotomy unpacked

New debates and agendas, which are increasingly global in scale, thus urge us to be highly critical towards conceptualisations across contexts. The New Urban Agenda, for example, and its call for new and 'well planned' urban solutions, pushes new investments in urbanism globally. Much finance, ranging from international donor money to private capital, is meant to become available for implementing this New Urban Agenda in the global South. This may result in top-down and large-scale projects, as exemplified by new city development and urban mega-projects that have skyrocketed in Africa and Asia. Often these projects are pushed as solutions to fast urban growth and climate change. But we should be critical of the effects not only on decreasing inclusivity and on displacement, but also on the oft taken-for-granted frameworks in which we tend to assess such processes. In this commentary, we have grappled with the analytic tensions between 'grab' and 'development' at the interstices of rural and urban realms to

conceptualise land conversion projects in their various virtual and physical stages. Rather than labelling current developments either as land grab or development or gentrification, we have shown that the diverse modalities and layered realities of direct and indirect exclusion (or inclusion) of the rural and urban poor should be central.

When analysing the consequences of these types of urban land investments in terms of development, we argue for a close dialogue with the rural land debate as they are not readily separable given deep interconnections and planetary urbanisation. In both cases, it is clear that land development and land grabbing are often two sides of the same coin. We thus need a new and integrated approach that transcends the grab–development dichotomy and recognises the high complexity of land investments in terms of a grab–development nexus. Taking some prominent discussions in the urban land sphere as a point of departure, this commentary proposes three specific avenues for further debate across the rural–urban divide.

Instead of limiting ourselves to the identification of direct outcomes and the highly-visible 'culprits' of inequality and exclusion, we need to identify in more detail the indirect and long-term effects that urban land investments have on livelihoods as well as the differentiation and complexity of these effects for different actors. As pointed out above, viewing these land deals through the lens of displacement chains makes us aware of the complexity and shifting scales between development and grab. In fact, this is perhaps what differentiates peri-urban land investments from 'purely' rural land deals: there are more opportunities to gain as people have high aspirations of urban livelihoods (Nguyen et al., 2017).

By zooming in on these different dimensions and manifestations of land grabs in rapidly transforming cities, we have shed new light on the sequences of displacement as well as the multi-scalar and multi-actor processes that transgress the analytical gap between (rural) land grabs and (urban) spatial development. The notion of the three-dimensional consequences of land development allows us to assess real estate projects in their full complexity, including the potential values of soil and the spaces above and underneath that soil and its imagined future uses. In our examples, development plans are not immediately implemented yet they trigger speculation and the accumulation of capital or political power in the hands of dominant groups. As such, we argue for a three-dimensional perspective that demarcates the opaque, hybrid grounds between 'winners' and 'losers' and the ambiguous roles that actors play, and unravels the social differentiations (whether of age, ethnicity, gender or any other parameter) that overlap broader categories of gaining or losing.

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Notes

1. While urban land has been a topic of much academic and policy research, focus has mostly rested on the virtues and disadvantages of land formalisation and registration of informal land rights, as well as policies such as land value capture. Increasing scarcity and pressures on urban land are only recently becoming an important part of urban debates.
2. Dr Boris Albornoz, personal communication, 26 June 2017.

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