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Abstract

The global rush for land can be understood as expression of the triple crisis concerning the environment (climate and natural resource depletion), the economic infrastructure (financial crisis), and increasingly unequal distribution of economic and material wealth (poverty, food insecurity, and insufficient health social security for the majority of the global population). The implementation of agricultural projects promoted by large scale land investments are mainly happening in areas where most often traditional communities practice mixed subsistence and market economies, based on various forms of low-external input agriculture. Consequently, large scale land investments profoundly affect the local societies. While some argue that this is offering jobs, access to markets, technology or capitals, others show that this promise is often not held in reality.

There is a general belief that the negative effects of large scale land investments could be mitigated if minimum conditions regarding social protection of the rights of local people could be achieved, e.g. through "free, prior and informed consent", the enforcement of human rights, or the application of voluntary guidelines of international organizations or CSR policies of companies. This suggests that the resistance that large scale land investments are increasingly facing, could be understood - in theoretical terms - as a new wave of the "great transformation" as described by Karl Polanyi. This means that the solution is sought by getting a better balance between companies and governments pushing for further marketization as a means for growth and rural agricultural development, and some social movements, NGOs and CSO claiming for better protection of social rights of local people through "good governance" by the state. However, as a closer analysis of the type of resistance that local people organize face to large scale land investments reveals that local communities often do not believe that the solution of their problems of political, economic, social, or cultural-ethnic marginalization can be resolved by the state. Based on case studies in Africa and South America we show that the skeptical attitude of local organizations towards the state is often not directly linked to the current incapacity or unwillingness of the states and governments to really protect the social rights of people. Their resistance rather is linked to the search for alternatives that are expressing values of their own emancipatory agenda e.g. self-determination, self-governance and deliberation facilitated by collective land and water right, commons and social relations that give priority to solidarity, cooperation and reciprocity within societal and economic realms of life, as well as with regard to "Nature". What this means for research and collective action will be explored by referring to Nancy Fraser's expansion of Polanyi's great transformation pointing to the need to move from the a "double" to a "triple" movement that links state, markets and emancipation.

Short bio

Stephan Rist is Associate professor for human geography at the Institute of Geography of the University of Bern. He is holder of the UNESCO Chair 'Natural and Cultural Heritage of Sustainable Mountain Development', and also works at the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) of the University of Bern, where he and heads the Cluster on Sustainability Governance of Land and Natural Resources. The geographic focus is on Latin America and Africa being involved in several international research projects, dealing with critical sustainability assessments of large scale land investments, food sustainability, local knowledge, social movements and transdisciplinary approaches of research aiming at the enhancement of societal transformation in view of environmental justice.