



Analysis

Commons grabbing and agribusiness: Violence, resistance and social mobilization

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ABSTRACT

The recent phenomenon of large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) is associated with what has been described as a global agrarian transition. New forms of land exploitation and concentration have led to profound socio-environmental transformations of rural production systems in Latin America, South-East Asia and Sub Saharan Africa. Scholars have pointed out that the expansion of transnational land investments is often associated with detrimental social outcomes, has negative environmental impacts and can represent a potential impediment to the achievement of many SDGs. In this paper, our primary concern is on the mounting evidence that LSLAs preferentially target the commons, in the process altering long-standing customary resource governance systems. While it has been shown that in many instances of commons grabbing associated with LSLAs, different types of social conflict emerge, it is less clear what forms of social mobilization and organized collective re-actions are taking place to defend the commons and contest such processes of dispossession and enclosure. The main aim of this contribution is to fill this gap by synthesizing and describing the different typologies of social mobilization and collective re-actions that emerge as a result of commons grabbing associated with the transnational expansion of the agribusiness frontier. In order to do this our research synthesizes information from the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas) shedding light on some of the key characteristics associated with the different forms and dynamics of social mobilization that are organized in reaction to agribusiness-related commons grabbing.

1. Introduction

The history of capitalism is a history of enclosures of the commons (Linebaugh, 2009). Dispossession of the commons is a process that can be traced back to different historical moments. Commons dispossession has been associated with the alienation of small-scale farmers, traditional land users and indigenous people from the land and the natural resources that support their systems of production and identity, and in a broader sense, their existence (Perelman, 2007; Wily, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013). An infamous depiction of injustice, subjugation, violence and eradication is the leitmotif of colonialism that echoes and resounds in many of the dynamics of contemporary neoliberal globalization (Harvey, 2005; Glassman, 2006). This wave of coercion, dispossession and “commons grabbing” gained new momentum with what has been

recently described as a new “global land rush” (Borras et al., 2011; Cotula, 2012)). The year 2008 was a watershed moment in this process. The triple interwoven conjuncture of the financial, climatic and food security crises triggered an escalating expansion of transnational Large-Scale Land Acquisitions (LSLAs). LSLAs have become a structural component of agribusiness development and are playing a central role in the redefinition of the key features of the current global agrarian transition (Cotula, 2012; Messerli et al., 2014; Davis et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2021). Some estimates exceed 48 million hectares of arable land (i. e., more than five times the entire area of Portugal) acquired globally since then (The Land Matrix 2020).

It is clear that in this reconfiguration of the relations of land, natural resources, and people, is the commodification force which subordinates social relations and the natural environment in which they develop, to

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the economic system (Polanyi, 1944; Cotula, 2013). This “new frontier in historical shifts between social embeddedness and commodification in land relations” (Cotula, 2013: p. 1623) is happening through social dynamics that are characterized by evident imbalanced power relations, conflict and violence (e.g. Linebaugh, 2009; De Angelis, 2012; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Federici and Linebaugh, 2018).

The social implications of LSLAs have been thoroughly discussed in an emerging body of scholarship on land and water grabbing (see special issues in *The Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 2012; *Water Alternatives*, 2012; *Development and Change*, 2013; *Globalisations*, 2013; *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2012; *Third World Quarterly*, 2013; Dell'Angelo et al., 2018). A meta-study of this literature showed that the large majority of the cases of land acquisitions happened in contexts of small-scale farming usually under common property regimes or multiple ownership claims and that coercion was a key dynamic (Dell'Angelo et al., 2017). This meta-analytical synthesis pointed at “commons grabbing” as a central dimension of the contemporary global land rush. The result is not surprising considering that most LSLAs are happening in countries where communal and customary land entitlements and management are prevalent (De Schutter, 2011; Fuys et al., 2008; Kugelman, 2012; Pearce, 2012; Wily, 2011a, 2011b). Very often, small-scale farmers and traditional natural resource users rely on land that is governed by customary, and indigenous systems of common property. For instance, it has been estimated that almost 70% of all the land in sub-Saharan Africa, can be categorized as customary common property and community-based tenure regimes (Deininger, 2003; Wily, 2011a, 2011b, 2012).

A fundamental question associated with the study of the contemporary global land rush that has been raised is ‘what are the political reactions from below?’ (Hall et al., 2015: 1). A collection of articles published in the special issue *Global land grabbing and political reactions ‘from below’* address this question looking at the wider responses that go beyond direct resistance and include different types of forms of mobilization and counter-mobilization in different case studies (*The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2015).

Complementing this work, the objective of this paper is to deepen the scope of analysis and provide a new systematic synthesis and characterization of the different dynamics of social mobilization that emerge as a result of commons grabbing specifically associated with global agribusiness expansion. We do this by analyzing data from the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas¹). The paper is structured as follows, Section 2 introduces the theoretical background by referring to an operational definition of commons grabbing and reviewing different theories of resistance; Section 3 explains our methods of analysis and provides information on the EJAtlas and data selection criteria; Section 4 illustrates the results of the synthesis; in Section 5 we discuss some theoretical reflections on the patterns emerging from our analysis; we finally conclude with some overarching reflections on the meaning of this study in Section 6.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Commons grabbing: an operational definition

The Ostromian approach explains the commons combining biophysical and institutional perspectives. The notion of commons is often analytically explained from the biophysical perspective (eg. Ostrom et al., 1994), from the political-institutional one (eg. Velicu and García-López, 2018) or from the combination of both perspectives (Cole and Ostrom, 2012). Ostrom et al. (2002) clarify the importance to distinguish between common-pool resources and common property regimes.

Common-pool resources are types of goods that are usually identified based on the double simultaneous characteristic of high difficulty of exclusion (i.e. it is difficult to exclude others from appropriation or use of the considered resource) and high subtractability (or rivalry) (i.e. the appropriation or use by an agent/s reduces the ability of another agent/s to benefit from the same resource) (Ostrom et al., 1994). Common property regimes in contrast are an institutional category. Since the classic Roman jurisprudence, the main four categories of institutional arrangements and property systems have been described as private, public, common property and open access. Cole & Ostrom, (2012: 42) explain that in common property systems “each member of the ownership group has the right to access and use group-owned resources in accordance with access and use rules established collectively by the group, and a duty not to violate access and use rules”. However, it is rare that these categorical definitions perfectly fit real-world cases because generally institutionally hybrid situations and overlapping property regimes are diffused (Dasgupta, 1995; Wily, 2011a). For example, the land is often *de jure* property of the government while *de facto* managed and used through customary, collective, community-based rules of access, use and exclusion (D’alisa, 2013; Villamayor-Tomas and García-López, 2018). Nevertheless, resources such as forests, rangelands, fisheries and groundwater have the defining biophysical features of common-pool resources (high difficulty to exclude and high subtractability) and are often governed (yet not exclusively) through common property regimes and customary or indigenous practices. It is on this specific intersection between natural resources and institutional arrangements that much of the traditional literature on the commons has focused (eg. Ostrom, 1990; Dietz et al., 2003; Armitage, 2005; Cox et al., 2010).

Dell'Angelo et al. (2017) build on different political economy and political ecology perspectives (Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Agrawal, 2005; Clement, 2010; Poteete et al., 2010; Borrás et al., 2011; Ostrom, 2011) to propose an operational heuristic framework associated with the definition of grabbed commons. This definition has been specifically developed to address the issue of ‘commons grabbing’ in the context of the contemporary global land rush and agrarian transition with specific attention to transnational agribusiness development (see Fig. 1). The authors articulate their analysis of commons-grabbing in three dimensions. The first dimension is related to the type of agricultural system of production, ranging from small-scale/subsistence to commercial/speculative. The second dimension is related to different institutional regimes and includes the different types of property systems and claims on the land that exist in a given place. The third dimension refers to coercion as a constitutive condition of commons grabbing.

According to this framework, commons are grabbed when large-scale land investments target land that is claimed by a multiplicity of

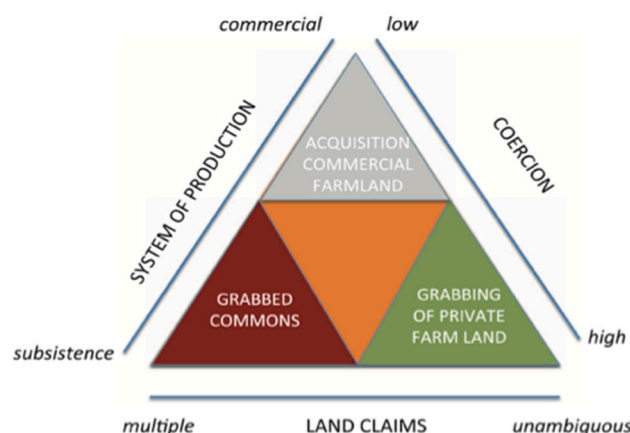


Fig. 1. Multidimensional definition of commons grabbing from Dell'Angelo et al., 2017, p.3.

¹ See: Temper, L., Demaria, F., Scheidel, A., Del Bene, D., & Martínez-Alier, J. (2018). The Global Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas): ecological distribution conflicts as forces for sustainability. *Sustainability Science*, 13(3), 573–584.

actors, in a context of imbalanced power relations between agribusiness investors and prior land users, which are often manifested through different levels and mechanisms of coercion. Last, this framework unveils how commons grabbed by agribusiness are frequently pushed into a transition from subsistence farming and/or small-scale uses of land (and other natural resources), to large-scale commercial agriculture and/or speculative investments.

This framework has a central role in our paper for two reasons. Firstly, as explained in detail in the methods section, it is used for our case selection. Secondly, in our analysis, we zoom in and investigate the dynamics of social mobilization, collective reaction, resistance and collective action associated with one of its three dimensions, that of “coercion”.

2.2. Theorizing resistance against commons grabbing

Villamayor-Tomas and García-López (2018) recently described the emerging force of social movements and mobilizations as a reaction to the different threats to the commons. Their systematic analysis confirms the interpretation of critical commons scholars, who depict the history of the commons, as one characterized by a dialectic tension between the systemic push for capital accumulation on one side, and the resistance of commoners and social movements on the other (e.g. De Angelis, 2012). Resistance has also been theorized in specific relation to the contemporary land grabbing phenomena. Borras and Franco (2013) describe the different types of struggles that local communities engage with: against expulsion, for incorporation, against land appropriation and concentration and for redistribution and recognition. Other authors offer theoretical models which help explain resistance or absence of resistance to land grabbing and the dynamics of such mobilizations (Hall et al., 2015). The Marxist (or Marxian) perspective on collective action focuses on the process of enclosure of the commons that has originally and continuously granted capital accumulation on an expanded scale (Linebaugh, 2009; De Angelis, 2012; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). Capital expansion dispossesses different social groups which resist by means of common political projects and class politics (Harvey, 2003; Federici and Linebaugh, 2018). The theoretical corpus represented by the heterodox theories of social movements argues that there is more than just the individualistic *Homo oeconomicus* behaviours or class consciousness theories. According to this perspective, people uniting in struggle and resistance can be explained by looking at the role of emotions and affective ties in social movements (Hall et al., 2015).

Another body of scholarship examines the dynamics of resistance in greater detail. For example, Temper, 2019, positions her analysis referring to the literature on transnational activism, agrarian resistance and politics of scale. Citing (Risse and Sikkink, 1999) and Tarrow (1998), she points at how the constructivist approach to study social movements highlights how social groups develop norms, beliefs and shared expectations of given actors. The act of ‘framing’ –the strategic (re-)creation of ideas that generate beliefs– drives, motivates and defines strategies and interventions of collective action. Temper also refers to the ‘scalar politics’ framework from political ecology, which helps in explaining why social activists move from the local up to the international level of contention in order to pursue their objectives. In Temper’s review, the work of Tarrow (2005) is central in explaining the different mechanisms of contentious politics which include: “global framing, internalization, diffusion, scale shift, externalization and coalition forming” (p. 10). Temper examines the ‘boomerang effect’ (Keck and Sikkink, 1999) which argues that weak non-state actors seek allies in the international arena to impact repressive policies in their country. This hypothesis suggests that transnational support is fundamental in those places where actors don’t have enough resources to counteract internal high levels of repression. However, in response to critiques that the boomerang promotes a paternalistic vision of transnational solidarity, where ideas, tactics and know-how, as well as material resources, are generated in the core countries and spread to the periphery, Temper

proposes an analysis that goes beyond the boomerang effect. Echoing the allegorical nature of projectile devices that could be employed in social resistance, she introduces the “catapult model” (2018, p. 20). What this model refers to is the inverse of the boomerang effect: situations where transnational NGOs find allies on the ground to promote reforms and push forward their agenda of resistance. This approach restores agency to actors on the ground. It also raises relevant questions that may be further empirically tested in our analysis regarding the effectiveness of coalitions in collective mobilizations and the role of international actors as well as a diversity of local actors joining in common cause.

The different theoretical bodies of scholarship on the politics of collective re-action provide a wide range of analytical perspectives that can explain what are the collective “reactions from below” to land grabbing. Building on these theoretical perspectives, as mentioned earlier, we focus our analysis on the coercion and collective re-action dimension of agribusiness commons grabbing providing a synthesis of a large number of cases from the EJAtlas.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data sources

The analysis draws on the great wealth of information that has been gathered through the Environmental Justice Atlas (Temper, 2019; Martínez-Alier et al., 2016). With global coverage of 3300 cases by November 2020, the EJAtlas is the largest database on environmental conflicts and mobilizations worldwide (Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas), 2021).

Each EJAtlas entry documents an environmental conflict and related social mobilizations in a standardized manner. Conflicts are categorized in one of ten mutually exclusive types (also referred to as “1st level” categories) that indicate the sector of the main project in dispute (e.g. mining, fossil fuels, water management, waste management, nuclear, land and biomass use, and others). Moreover, and aiming to show the complexity of these conflicts, the EJAtlas provides more than 50 detailed non-exclusive sub-categories of conflict types (also referred to as “2nd level category”), such as land acquisition conflicts, hydroelectric dams, or the like. For instance, a mining conflict can be linked to land acquisition conflicts and toxic waste treatment and many other sub-categories. Furthermore, each entry includes detailed information on the commodities involved, relevant actors and companies, the intensity of conflict in terms of the scale of mobilizations and level of violence, the groups mobilizing for more just and sustainable resource uses, the forms of mobilization used, the social, health and economic impacts, as well as key conflict outcomes. Information is provided both as qualitative descriptive texts, as well as codes that can be used for quantitative analyses. For a definition of these variables see Scheidel et al. (2020).

The EJAtlas only documents conflicts that are verifiable through previously published secondary sources. Data collection is based on a collaborative process during which academic researchers, journalists, civil society actors, social movement and non-governmental organizations members, can register in the EJAtlas to identify environmental conflicts and provide information and secondary sources on conflict events. Data are gathered and cross-checked from a variety of secondary sources, including academic articles, civil society reports, news articles, lawsuits, formal complaints or petitions. Such non-academic information sources on local conflict dynamics and events are frequently used in diverse research on environmental conflicts and social mobilizations (e.g. Escobar, 1998; Earl et al. 2004; Gerber, 2011).

One frequent concern arising from the use of diverse non-academic sources is about potential bias, such as conflict coverage, which we discuss below, or descriptions of violent events by, or against, protesters. For the case of newspaper sources, Earl et al. (2004) show that ‘hard facts’, such as violent events, tend to be reported quite accurately, while biases are more frequently introduced for ‘soft facts’ such as actor

opinion, or protest motivations. Where possible, triangulation of information through various information sources is an important step to enhance data quality. Such quality checks of the provided information, particularly on sensitive information such as violent events, are pursued through a permanent team of case moderators who also assures consistent coding of conflicts through the EJAtlas data form. See [Temper et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Temper \(2016\)](#) for further explanation of the EJAtlas' methodology and mapping process.

The resulting EJAtlas database represents a large convenience sample of an unknown total of recent environmental conflicts worldwide. These sample characteristics entail several implications and limitations for data analysis and interpretation that should be considered. First, due to a lack of coverage, information and collaborators for different regions, the EJAtlas has an uneven geographical coverage and should not be considered as a statistically representative sample. Some regions and countries are documented with a greater number of conflicts than others, not necessarily because there are more conflicts on the ground, but also because of better availability of conflict documentation and collaborators. This limits, for example, the possibilities for comparisons across countries and continents and the data employed here should not be used to compare countries regarding specific conflict events. Second, the lack of coverage of some regions may particularly affect the representation of specific actors affected by commons grabbing in these regions. Specifically, the entire EJAtlas database, as well as the subset of cases analyzed in this article, has limited coverage on Central Asia, Central Africa, and Mongolia. Given that in these regions, there are diffuse commons used by pastoralist (eg. [Brondizio and Le Tourneau, 2016](#)), we are aware that pastoralist conflicts are underrepresented in this study. This implies that it may make up a larger share of commons conflicts than indicated by our results.

3.2. Sample selection

To characterize patterns and main features of social mobilization, resistances and organized collective re-actions that are taking place as a response to commons grabbing produced by agribusiness Large-Scale Land Acquisitions, this paper provides an analytical synthesis of all the EJAtlas agribusiness cases related to land acquisition conflicts. The operational assumption here is that, following [Dell'Angelo et al.'s \(2017\)](#) framework for "commons grabbing" in the context of agribusiness development, we are dealing with cases that can be illustrative of the dynamics of commons dispossession. The case selection was done through a three-step screening process, during which the entire EJAtlas database (including all cases registered up to December 2018, $n = 2641$) was reduced to 185 cases relevant for this study.

During the first step, we filtered for all cases that were characterized

as "land acquisition conflicts" (2nd level category), and involved at least one of these commodities related to agribusiness: coffee, cotton, cellulose, corn/maize, jatropha, rubber, palm oil, soybeans, sugar, ethanol, wheat, rice, cut flowers, fruits and vegetables, live animals, fish, shrimps, timber, eucalyptus, pine, carbon offsets, biological resources. This resulted in a total of 253 conflicts. During the second step, following [Dell'Angelo et al.'s \(2017\)](#) definition of grabbed commons in the context of agribusiness development, we further selected only those conflicts overlapping with agribusiness activities. This included cases with at least one of the following 2nd level categories: "Plantation conflicts including pulp", "deforestation", "Intensive food production monoculture and livestock", "Agrofuels and biomass energy plants", "Water access rights and entitlements", "Logging and non-timber extraction", "Agrotoxics" and "GMOs". In this process, 36 cases were excluded as not relevant, resulting in a sample of 217 cases. For instance, land acquisition conflicts related to large-scale tourism projects or as a result of conservation and biodiversity regarding REDD+ were excluded. During the third step, we screened the qualitative information by revising the "description" and "project details" fields, to further identify whether the case was linked to agribusiness activities or not, which led to the further exclusion of 32 cases. A total of 185 cases were eventually analyzed ([Fig. 2, A](#)). From the total of cases only 18 report an "end date" which means that 167 of these conflicts (90%) are ongoing, or no information was available on whether the conflict ended. In addition, from the 185 cases, we further narrowed down and specifically conducted a second round of analysis for a subset of 72 cases that are classified as "high intensity conflicts" ([Fig. 2, B](#)).

From a total of 185 analyzed cases, 64 countries, mostly from the global South, were included. Specifically, the following countries had the majority of cases: Indonesia (32 cases), Brazil (15 cases), Cambodia (15 cases), Colombia (7 cases) and Mozambique (6 cases). All these were cases of agribusiness related conflicts which were associated with specific agricultural commodities and resources. Among these commodities, the top 5 reported categories are land ($n = 107$), palm oil ($n = 73$), timber ($n = 44$), water ($n = 23$) and sugar ($n = 33$).

4. Results

We first direct our analysis to address five overarching questions: 1. *What types of actors are mobilizing?* 2. *When did the mobilization begin?* 3. *What forms of mobilization are happening?* 4. *What type of outcomes did the reactions lead to?* 5. *What is the level of mobilization and intensity of violence associated with the conflict?* 6. *What typologies of violence affect different types of actors?* After addressing these questions, we focus on the dimension of coercion in commons grabbing and unpack the variety of dynamics that can be related to it by analyzing the subset of 72 cases that

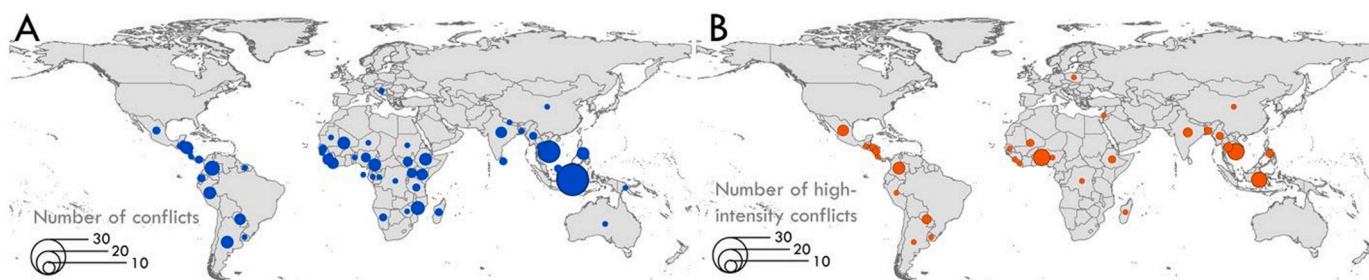


Fig. 2. A. Geographical distribution of all selected land acquisition conflict cases ($n = 185$); B. high intensity land acquisition conflict cases subset ($n = 72$).

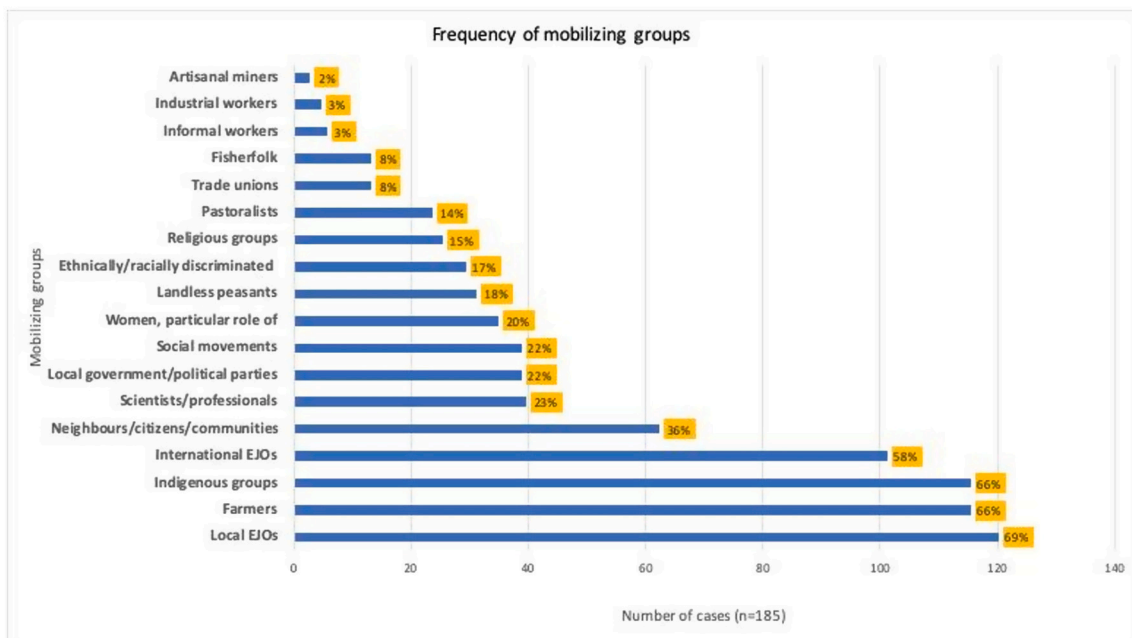


Fig. 3. Frequency of group mobilized in land acquisition conflicts related to agribusiness. Own elaboration from EJAtlas data, (n = 185). Note that groups are not mutually exclusive.

are classified as “high intensity conflicts” to specifically illustrate the features and characteristics of cases with higher levels of confrontation and violence.

4.1. What types of actors are mobilizing?

According to EJAtlas data, the groups that mobilize most frequently in land acquisition conflicts related to agribusiness are ‘Local EJOs’² (69%), ‘indigenous groups’ (66%) ‘farmers’ (66%) and ‘neighbors, citizens communities’ (36%). ‘Women’ (20%) and ‘landless peasants’ (18%) appears to be also relevant group of protesters. As Fig. 3 shows, ‘international EJOs’ (58%), ‘scientists’ (23%) and wider ‘social movements’ (22%), “often play a role in supporting locally organized movements. It is worth to note that of most of the analyzed cases involve several groups, and that protesters may belong to different social groups. Furthermore, governmental actors are sometimes drivers of land conflicts, but in different occasions they can also act as supporters to environmental and land defenders. For instance, ‘local governmental and political parties’ mobilize against agribusiness land acquisition in 22% of the cases”.

4.2. When did the mobilization begin?

The EJAtlas gives information about the temporality of reaction from the mobilizing groups against the conflictive projects. It categorizes in five excluding categories, in ‘reaction’ (referring to mobilizations that happen after the project implementation started, or during the operation of the project), ‘preventive’ (referring to mobilizations that start before project implementation), ‘for reparation’ (referring to mobilizations that start after the project has already produced tangible socio-

environmental negative effects), ‘latent’ when there is no visible resistance, but mobilizations might appear anytime soon, and ‘unknown’ when there is no information available on protest start. The selected cases were mostly categorized as ‘reactive’ protests (65%), occurring during the construction or operation of the project that lead to a land grabbing process. In 22% of the cases, the mobilization was ‘preventive’ and finally, in 5% of the cases the mobilization took action for ‘reparations’. Latent conflicts reach 4% (Fig. 4).

4.3. - What forms of mobilization are happening?

There is a variety of actions and mobilizing forms that take place in response to the studied agribusiness LSLAs (Fig. 5). These forms range from oppositional collective actions such as strikes (~5%), occupation of public spaces (~6%), boycotting -both products or official procedures- (~4%), street protests (~51%) and land occupation (~ 21%) to less confrontational actions such as public campaigns (~35%), official letters and petitions (~59%) and to more reformative and propositional approaches such as the development of alternative proposals (~21%). Judicial activism (~ 39%) (the use of state institutions, national and international legal tools to leverage land struggles) is common. Some forms of mobilization may be potentially violent, such as property damage (~ 16%) and sabotage (~5%). Moreover, in the majority of cases (65%) local movements built alliances with NGOs and International Organizations. Mobilizing forms are not mutually exclusive, on average more than 5 forms of mobilizing are used for each case. For instance, on March 8th 2006, 3000 women from the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) and la Via Campesina jointly occupied eucalyptus nurseries in Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, they used a diversity of mobilization forms and only eventually destroyed more than five million seedlings EJAtlas (2017b). They denounced “the social and environmental consequences of the advance of the monoculture of eucalyptus in their lands and condemned what they called “green latifundia” and/or “green deserts”. They made claims against the high use of water in these monocultures and because of the use of chlorine in the bleaching process of the eucalyptus pulp which might cause health damages.

² Local Environmental Justice Organizations (EJOs) refers to civil society organizations or informal collectives involved in the conflicts at a local scale. They thus have a local profile, as their scope and influence focusses on a specific territory, or on country level. They include NGOs and grassroots organizations such as formal and informal associations.

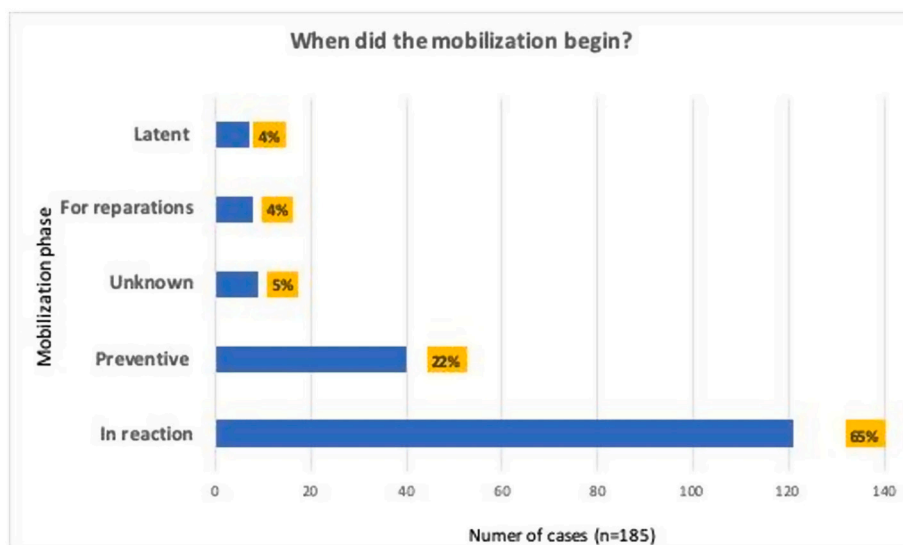


Fig. 4. Frequency of temporality of reaction against the project. Own elaboration from EJAtlas data, (n = 185). Note that variables are mutually exclusive.

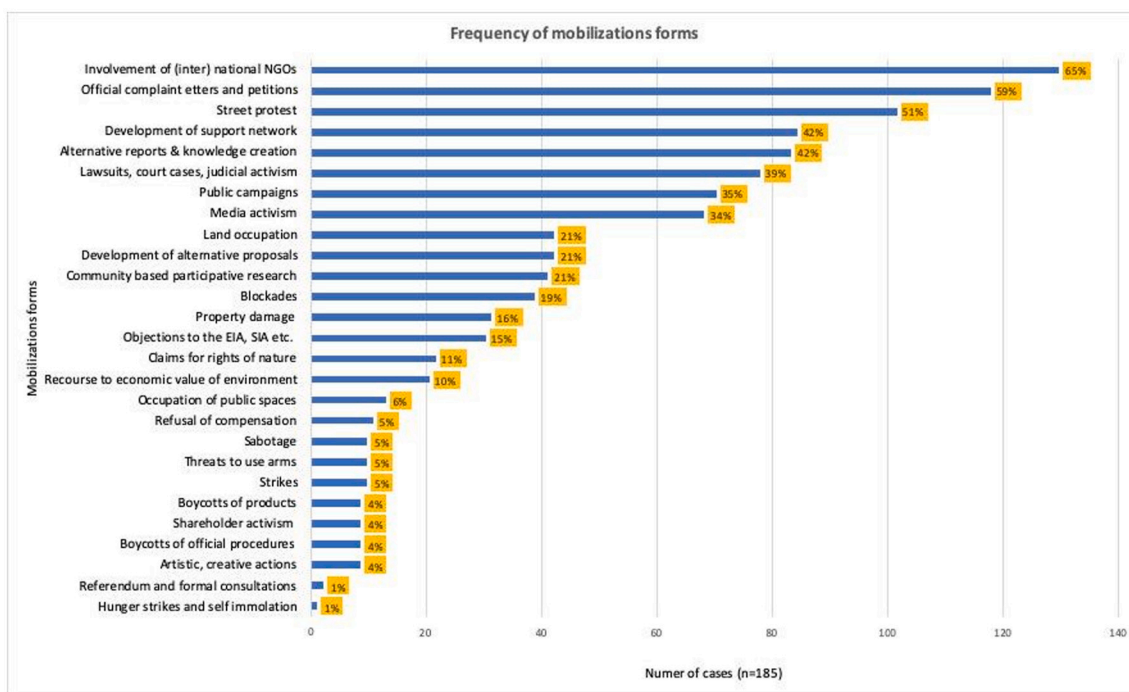


Fig. 5. Frequency of mobilizations forms reported to protest in land acquisition conflicts related to agribusiness. Own elaboration from EJAtlas data, (n = 185). Note that variables are not mutually exclusive.

These forms of actions vary in terms of degree of contestation ranging from propositional approaches and formal procedures, building networks and alliances, generating new information, to different types of confrontational actions, non-violent and potentially violent ones (Fig. 9).

4.4. What type of outcomes did the reactions lead to?

A variety of key events and outcomes have been coded in the EJAtlas that occur over the duration of the land acquisition conflicts (Fig. 6). They range from different forms of repression to policy changes and

modifications to the project. The most frequent outcomes are described in the different forms that violence against those who mobilize takes shape. Repression (37%), migration and displacement (35%), violent targeting (32%) and criminalization of activists (32%) are some of the most frequently described categories with several instances of environmental and land activists assassinated (24%). The occurrence of repression for this data sample is substantially higher than the global average of cases reported for all EJAtlas cases (see Scheidel et al., 2020), which points to the coercive nature of commons grabbing. It appears that in these types of land acquisition conflicts, institutional responses available through state apparatus, public officials and implementation

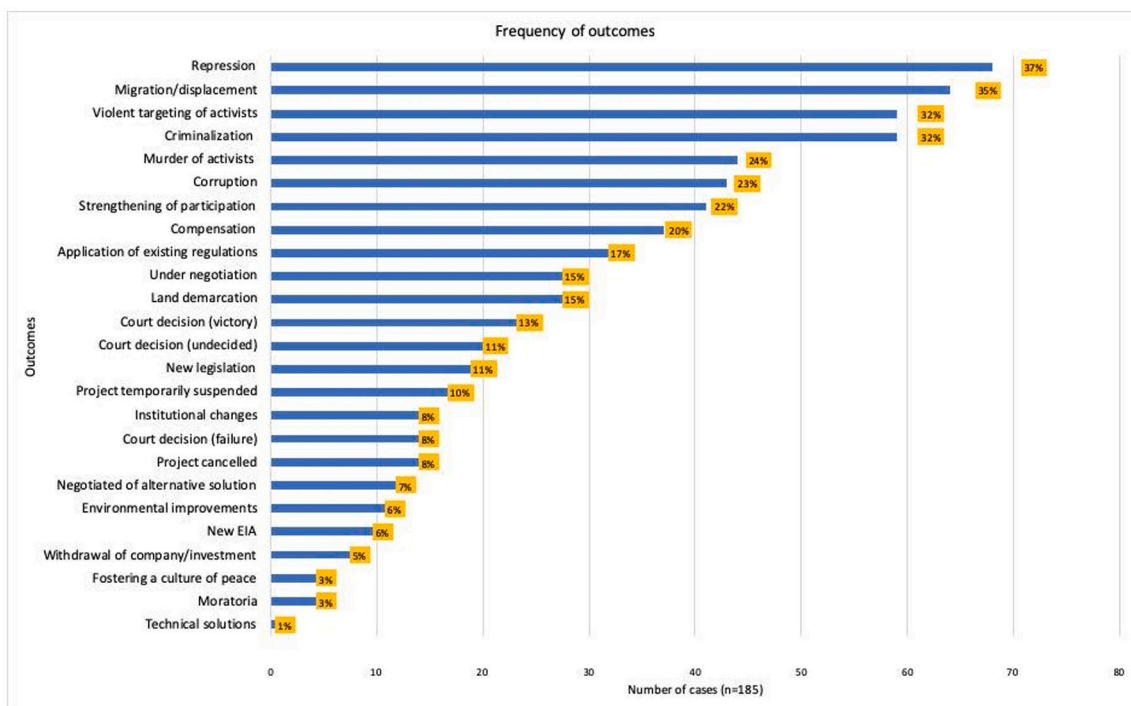


Fig. 6. Frequency of outcomes of land acquisition conflicts related to agribusiness activities. Own elaboration from EJAtlas data, (n = 185). Note that outcomes are not mutually exclusive; cases involve commonly several outcomes.

of laws and policies, such as the application of existing regulations (17%), the creation of new legislation (11%), and in general, institutional changes (8%), are relatively less frequent. This might be the case in many conflicts mapped in Brazil, where grassroots movement leveraged policy and institutional frameworks for the creation of “Reservas Extractivistas” which are a legal instrument for the creation of protected areas where the traditional populations can continue its activities with no risk of being expropriated.

4.5. What is the level of mobilization and the intensity of violence associated with the different conflicts?

The ‘intensity level’ is a variable that combines both levels of direct and physical violence within the conflict and the scale of the mobilizations (number of people involved) (Fig. 7). The largest share (37% of analyzed cases), are conflicts of ‘high intensity’, characterized by mass mobilizations and/or arrests, criminalization, violence and even murders. Key examples of such high intensity conflicts include the “Massacre

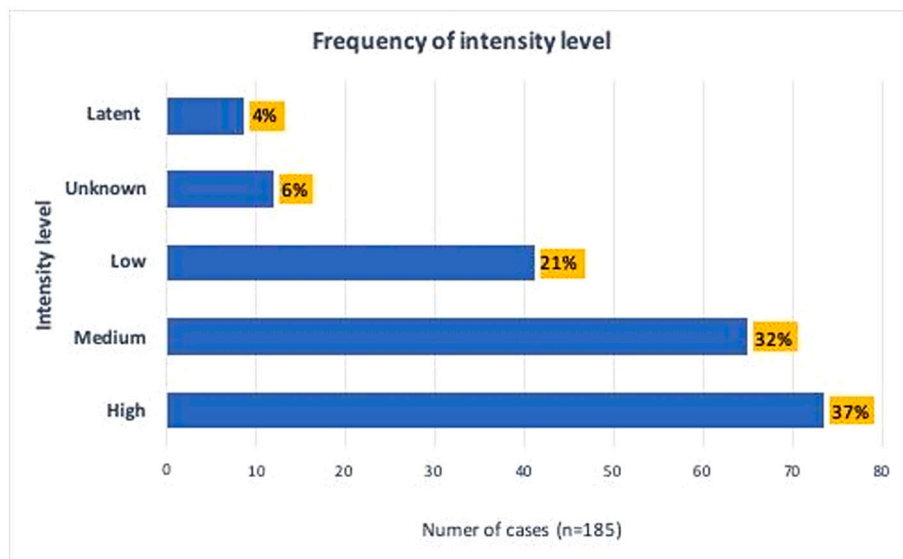


Fig. 7. Frequency of intensity level of land acquisition conflicts related to agribusiness. Own elaboration from EJAtlas data, (n = 185). Note that variables are mutually exclusive.

of Curuguaty”, in Paraguay where on June 2015, 11 peasants and six policemen were killed as a result of violent evictions of peasants who had occupied the lands of Marina Kue to stop the increased sowing of transgenic soybeans (EJAtlas, 2017a). Another example is the Garifuna resistance in Honduras against land grabbing for palm oil plantations where local communities “are threatened by eviction, displacement, intimidation and criminal violence” (EJAtlas, 2015a). This subset of ‘high intensity conflicts’ is analyzed more in detail in Section 4.7. In 32% of the cases, conflicts fall under the definition of ‘medium intensity’, which refers to visible mobilizations such as street protests but occurring at a smaller scale, and without an excessive level of violence. Low intensity conflicts account for 21% of the cases and usually refer to some local mobilizations and dissent. 6% is unknown and 5% latent (4%) which refers to those conflicts where there is no visible resistance beyond the everyday forms of resistance termed “weapons of the weak” by Scott (Scott, 2008) but signals that there might be in future. Such cases also include those where NGOs are mobilizing but no outright mobilization by the local community.

4.6. What typologies of violence affect different types of actors?

Small-scale farmers, indigenous people, landless peasants, pastoralists and traditional forest users are the actors that are most directly affected by land and commons grabbing (Dell'Angelo et al., 2017). In this study, we find that for those cases where these groups are mobilizing groups- repression and criminalization are occurring systematically (Fig. 8). Moreover, in a large number of cases violent targeting and also killings are reported. Fig. 8 shows the frequency of deaths in cases where pastoralists, landless peasants, indigenous groups or small-scale farmers were involved in the mobilization. We see that respectively in 20%, 39%, 27% and 27% of the analyzed conflicts in which pastoralists, landless peasants, indigenous groups or small-scale farmers were involved in some form of social mobilization and resistance, the killing of one or more activists involved was reported.

Frequency of repressive outcomes associated to the involvement of different actors depending on the commons.

4.7. Zooming in: high intensity conflict cases

From the 185 cases we further narrow down our analysis to 72 cases that are classified as ‘high intensity conflicts’. Of these 72 high intensity conflicts, the highest number occurred in Brazil (9 cases) Cambodia (9 cases) and Indonesia (8 cases). These are followed by Colombia (5 cases), Mexico (4 cases), Paraguay, India and Thailand (3 cases each), and several more countries in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia with one or two cases.

4.7.1. Conflict types

All these 72 cases are classified as ‘land acquisition conflicts’, of these, as non-exclusive sub-categories, 51% are described as ‘plantation conflicts’, 39% associated with the issue of ‘deforestation’, 33% related with ‘intensive food production, monocultures and livestock’, 18% with ‘agrofuels and biomass energy production’, 18% associated with ‘logging’ and 13% with issues of ‘water access rights and entitlements’.

4.7.2. Agricultural commodities

The types of agricultural commodities that are more frequently listed include ‘palm oil’ (35%), ‘timber’ (29%), ‘sugar’ (19%), ‘eucalyptus’ (11%), ‘soybean’ (8%), ‘fruits and vegetables’ (8%), ‘cellulose’ (8%), and ‘rubber’ (6%).

4.7.3. Actors mobilizing

The frequencies for the types of actors that mobilize in high intensity conflicts are similar to the broader sample. Also, for high intensity conflict cases, farmers (76%), indigenous groups (71%), local environmental justice organizations (69%) and international environmental justice organizations (56%), communities (49%) and landless peasants (32%) are the main categories of groups that mobilize most frequently.

4.7.4. Forms of mobilization

A visible characteristic of the high intensity conflicts cases subset is the increased use of specific mobilization forms. Particularly high frequencies, compared with the broader sample, are reported for ‘street protests’ (76%), ‘public campaigns’ (49%), ‘blockades’ (42%), ‘land

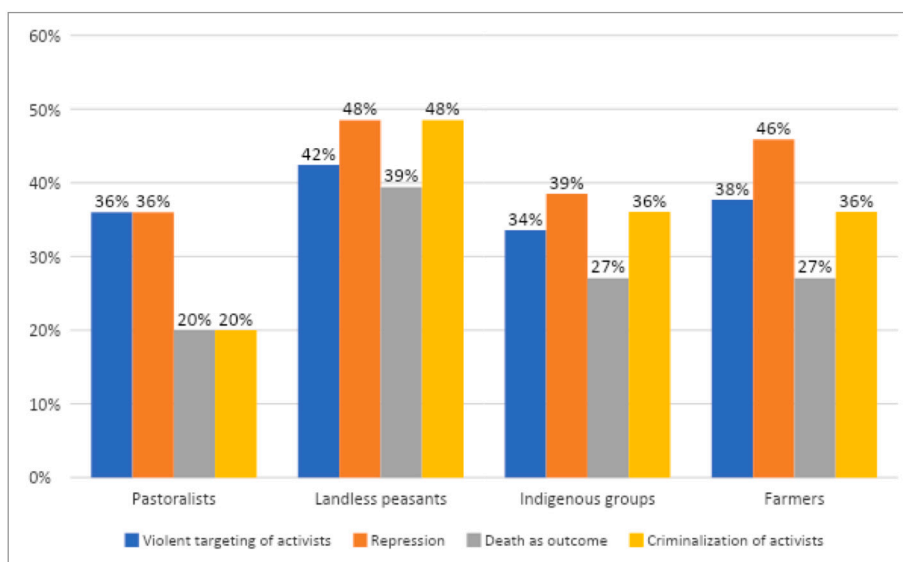


Fig. 8. Frequency of repressive outcomes associated with the involvement of different actors impacted by the agribusiness operations. Own elaboration from EJAtlas data (n = 185). Note that variables are not mutually exclusive.

Characteristics	Actions	Frequency all cases (n = 185)		Frequency high intensity cases (n = 72)	
Conventional protest, demonstrations and appeals	Official complaints and petitions		59%		61%
	Street protest		51%		76%
	Lawsuits		39%		43%
	Public campaigns		35%		49%
	Media activism		34%		35%
	Formal objections (EIA, SIA, etc)		15%		6%
	Rights of nature arguments		11%		10%
	Appeals to economic valuation		10%		4%
	Strikes		5%		8%
	Artistic actions		4%		8%
	Public referenda		1%		1%
Building collaborations and alliances	Involvement of NGOs		65%		63%
	Development of support networks		42%		47%
Creation of knowledge and alternatives	Alternative knowledge creation		42%		38%
	Community based participative research		21%		21%
	Development of alternative proposals		21%		19%
Confrontational, non-violent actions	Blockades		19%		42%
	Land occupation		34%		44%
	Occupation of public spaces		6%		17%
	Refusal of compensation		5%		8%
	Boycotts of official processes		4%		10%
	Boycotts of companies and products		4%		10%
	Hunger strikes, self-immolation		1%		1%
Potentially violent actions	Property damage		16%		28%
	Sabotage		5%		1%
	Threats to use arms		5%		13%

Fig. 9. Characteristics of mobilization forms for all cases (n = 185) and for high intensity conflict cases subset (n = 72). Own elaboration from EJAtlas, major changes in values highlighted in red. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

occupation' (44%), 'occupation of public spaces' (17%), 'boycotts of official procedures' (10%), 'boycotts of companies and products' (10%), 'property damage' (28%) and 'threats to use arms' (13%).

4.7.5. Forms of repression and violence

In line with the high intensity classification of this subset, these cases are subject to a variety of dynamics of violent 'repression' (63% of the cases) with visible increase in 'militarization' (49%) and 'violent targeting of activists' (67%). In the majority of cases 'violation of human rights' (71%) is denounced and 'criminalization of activists' (56%) is common practice. In 78% of cases, killing of an activist was a reported outcome. For instance, Human Rights Watch (2014) published a report about the land conflict in Bajo Aguán, Honduras, titled "There Are No Investigations Here". Politicians have apparently aided the allocation of land rights to private companies through a string of agrarian reform laws. In this case, Dinant Corporation started to evict local peasants from their lands for the purpose of monoculture Palm Oil plantations. Reportedly, protest was met with torture, arson, intimidation, disappearances and murder of activists, the majority of which was not investigated (Edelman and León, 2013; EJAtlas, 2014a).

4.7.6. Socio-economic impacts

The groups that are subject to high intensity conflict, in addition to

direct violence, suffer a variety of socio-economic impacts (see Fig. 10). The most prominent ones include land dispossession, loss of livelihood and displacement. For instance, in Sumatra Indonesia, PT Tor Ganda annexed over 10, 000 acres of forest and subsistence land for monoculture conversion, supposedly without permits. The march which was subsequently organized by the local farmers was attacked by "hoodlums and police", which burned over 100 houses, wounding 30 and killing 1. Further resistance could not be mounted and villages definitively lost their land and thus livelihood (EJAtlas, 2016).

4.7.7. Alliances

In high intensity conflicts, alliances between local actors affected by land and commons grabbing and other groups supporting their struggle play a fundamental role. In the majority of cases analyzed protesters are composed of a variety of actors operating at different scales, such as international environmental justice organizations (involved in 56% of cases), national and international NGOs (63%), and local environmental justice organizations (69%) (Fig. 11, below). Researchers, scientist and professionals on the ground are often involved (31%) as well as social movements (29%). In a large part of the sample (47%), one of the strategies of resistance and mobilization is explicitly developing a network for collective and coordinated action. An infamous example is the KDC land grab case in Cambodia. In this case numerous villagers

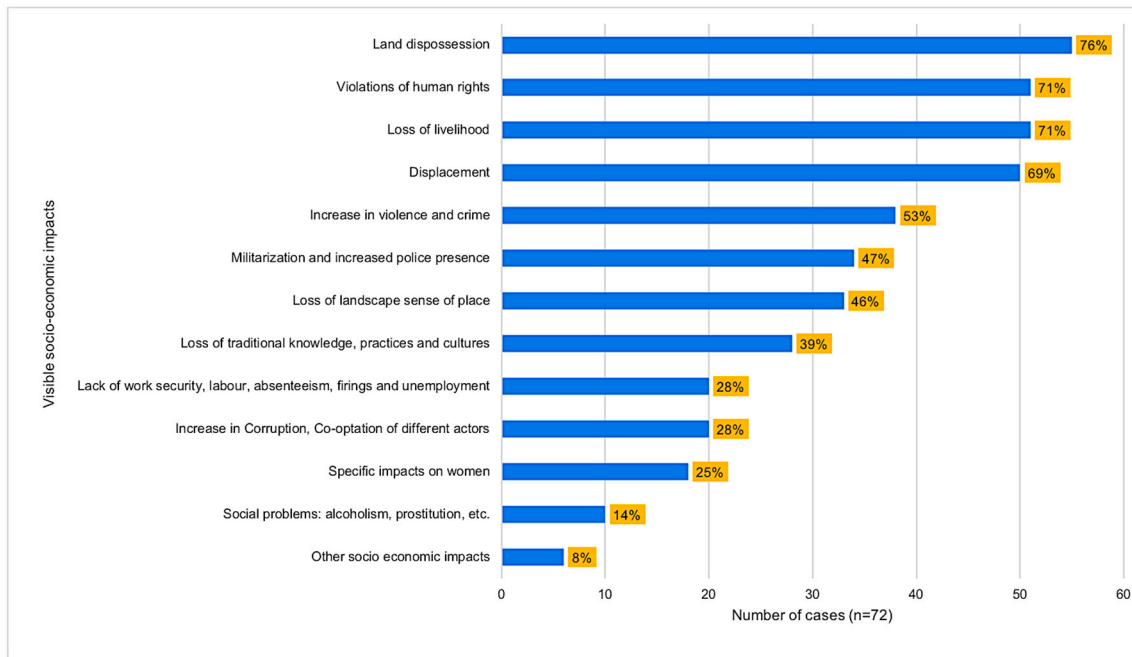


Fig. 10. Frequency of socio-economic impacts on impacted groups in high intensity violence cases. Own elaboration from EJAtlas data, (n = 72). Note that variables are not mutually exclusive.

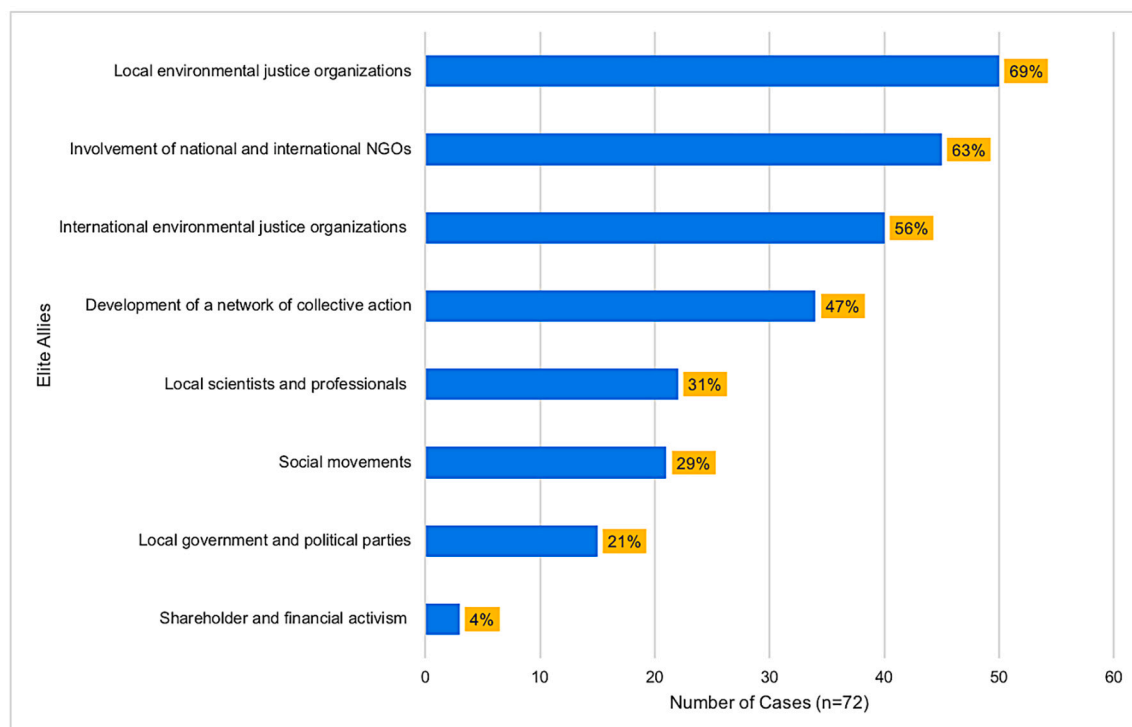


Fig. 11. Frequency of key allies in high intensity violence cases. Own elaboration from EJAtlas data, (n = 72). Note that variables are not mutually exclusive.

were evicted from their farmland by the Cambodian company KDC, owned by political elites. After a first appeal the courts ruled against the local farmers. Formal complaints were rejected and the KDC started to evict families by force and destroy farmers' houses. Eventually, the involvement of 25 NGOs and human rights organizations lead the UN to start an investigation. These activities lead to a temporary suspension of the eviction activities (EJAtlas, 2015b).

5. Discussion

In this paper we identify and synthesize emerging patterns of violence, resistance and social mobilization through an analysis of 185 cases of land acquisition conflicts related to agribusiness development which following Dell'Angelo et al. (2017) framework for "commons grabbing" are cases illustrative of the dynamics of commons dispossession in the context of the global land rush.

In terms of *types of actors that mobilize*, local organizations are the actors that mobilize most frequently in the analyzed cases (Fig. 3). This highlights the important role of communities in forms of collective reactions. This key role of the collective dimension of land struggles against coercive measures is frequently overseen in media reports, who tend to depict the stories of individual land defenders, and invisible in recent global statistics of killings of land and environmental defenders (cf. Scheidel et al., 2020). Recognition of the collective nature of these struggles is however important, to unveil the efforts as well as risks faced by the collectives to which they belong to, in protecting and defending the commons against outside appropriators. Indigenous people, pastoralists, and to a certain extent small-scale farmer, are typically the users most affected through processes of commons grabbing because of their dependence on land (Dell'Angelo et al., 2017). This is reflected in the frequent appearance of indigenous and farmers as mobilizing groups, both in the broader sample (Fig. 3) and in the 'high intensity conflicts' sub-set, whereas we explain the lower observed frequency of pastoralists due to our geographical sample distribution (Fig. 2, see also Section 3). Resistance can throw historically antagonistic actors, such as farmers and pastoralists into "marriages of convenience" or temporary alliances (Temper, 2016), as they strategize together how to stop communal land, with its overlapping and contested land claims, from being converted into commercial private operations.

The prominent role of international organizations in these conflicts is clear. International Environmental Organizations are involved in 58% of the conflicts analyzed and 63% of those which are high intensity. This rate of involvement is about double the global average for all cases registered in the EJAtlas (30%, as reported in Scheidel et al., 2020). This frequency may signal a bias in reporting of cases with international campaigns pushed by international organizations, and points to the different models of resistance described by Temper (2019), where alliances between local and international actors, either through "boomerang" or "catapult" models, shape the dynamics of commons-grabbing resistance. It is also an indication of the high capacity and prominence of agrarian and rural social movements to mobilize on the global policy and advocacy stage. As McKeon (2013) argues, they have exploited the political window of opportunity opened up by global attention on land-grabbing to push for representation and rights for peasants in spaces such as in the Committee on World Food Security, the negotiation of Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Land, Fisheries and Forests and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other people working in rural areas, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2018. This last declaration includes specific safeguards for the commons, as in Article 17, which affirms peasants' right to land individually or collectively and which charges that States shall recognize and protect the natural commons and their related systems of collective use and management (UN General Assembly, 2018). Threats from globalization seem to produce globalized antidotes. Transnational alliance building among peasants, rural peoples and national and international organizations defending the commons thus demonstrates the potential for greater organization and effectiveness.

These aspects confirm precedent theoretical elaborations. First it raises attention on the role of social movements in governing the commons, which has been extensively described by Villamayor-Tomas and García-López (2018) in supporting collective re-actions and defending the commons. Actors affected by commons grabbing are not only united in dealing with the same threats, but they actually organize in collective re-actions. The term 're-action' is particularly appropriated to describe the development of these collective actions. Looking at when *the mobilization begins*, it is clear that in the large majority of the cases these groups mobilized in reaction to the projects and the acquisitions that they confronted. This aspect brings to light several important aspects, one is that it raises the concern that despite the narrative on 'informed consent' that is often invoked when describing the implementation of large-scale agribusiness ventures, local actors seem to resort to collective

reactions when the project is already in advanced planning phase. This gives some important insights on the level (and lack) of participation and how these communities are involved (or excluded in most cases) in the decision-making processes associated with agribusiness development. What clearly emerges is that most of the times local communities seem to become aware of the project implications once it is already launched. For example, in a case involving the Texas-based Nile Trade Development, the local community only discovered the deal three years after the initial signing (EJAtlas 2014b).

Another aspect that emerges from this work, which we believe is a novel contribution to the theory of the commons, is that organized collective (re)actions are critical not only in the maintenance and governance of the commons, but they evidently play a role in their defense. In terms of the *forms of mobilization*, it is interesting to observe that in the majority of the cases the actions were peaceful, often following institutional and propositional approaches rather than confrontational ones. However, there are some relevant differences between the frequency in all cases and the ones in the high intensity conflicts sub-set. For the high intensity conflicts confrontational actions are reported more frequently. For example, occupations of public spaces, boycotting formal procedures, companies and products, blockades, street protests, land occupation, property damage, and threat to use arms occur much more often in the high intensity conflict sub-set.

A disconcerting outcome from this synthesis is that while on the side of the collective re-actions it seems clear that the prevailing patterns of organization are peaceful, the social outcomes that result are frequently violent, involving also assassinations (see also Del Bene et al., 2018). More than a third of the cases that we analyzed were described as 'high intensity conflicts'. Among the 'high intensity conflicts', in 30% of the cases direct violence against the mobilizing groups is reported. In particular the social outcomes resulting from the mobilizations show a high level of oppression and violence. Repression, displacement, violent targeting, criminalization and assassination of activist are much more frequent than other non-violent social outcomes such as legislative and institutional changes. In addition to confirming one of the main results from Dell'Angelo et al. (2017), that the dynamics of commons grabbing are inherently characterized by power imbalance, coercion and violence, this synthesis brings novel information and characterizations about the ways in which coercion and violence manifest more frequently. What results from this work is that there seems to be a structural dynamic of oppression that starts from the violation of communities and collective interests, which then leads to collective reactions, that eventually are suppressed through coercion and violence. We have not investigated in this paper how this repression might cause backfire leading to increased public outrage and support and eventual government accommodation to the protesters demands (Hess and Martin, 2006). However, given the paucity of positive outcomes in high intensity cases, it appears that such dynamics are rare.

The fact that violence is a recurrent pattern to suppress environmental defenders is very problematic (Navas et al., 2018). In addition to its human rights violation aspect, it suppresses fundamental emerging forces for sustainability (Scheidel et al., 2018). The way in which the commons are being threatened through the advancement of neoliberal frontiers of transnational resources exploitation, and the way in which the resulting organized social re-actions displayed in defense of these commons are systematically suppressed, raise environmental and political concerns. There is evidence that commons systems are often able to ensure environmental sustainability (Cox et al., 2010) and it has been clearly explained how ecological distribution conflicts play a key role in denouncing and proposing alternatives to mechanisms of natural resource exploitation that are unsustainable (Scheidel et al., 2018). In this light, the collective reactions organized to resist commons grabbing should be seen, recognized and safeguarded as valuable forces for sustainability.

A key issue lies in the problematic role of governments and the social and economic forces that hegemonize the State apparatuses and

organizations in governing the commons in the contemporary era of neoliberal globalization. According to Mansbridge (2014), the State could potentially support the autonomous self-organization of common property systems through (i) the imposition of intermediate solutions when local parties cannot reach a shared agreement, (ii) the provision of relatively neutral information, (iii) the provision of an arena for negotiation and agreement discussion, and (iv) the social infrastructure for monitoring, compliance and sanctioning mechanisms. However, the critical arguments about the deficiencies associated with state-centric forms of commons governance are amply debated and touch upon even more fundamental questions on self-organization, participation, democracy and cooperation (see Cumbers, 2015). As seen in our results (Fig. 6), available institutional measures, such as the use of existing laws to safeguard the environment and human rights, or the creation of new laws to protect people and commons land, are often not implemented. The problematic role of the State apparatuses and organizations is also a critical aspect that emerges from the recent body of literature on the global land rush. As synthesized in Dell'Angelo et al. (2017), when it comes to economically powerful interests such as the ones associated with transnational large-scale land investments, the “face” of the State that more often manifests, is the one exhibited by national governments that have a key role in allocating exclusive land concessions to powerful foreign investors. This happens not only by disregarding the traditional users that rely on these resources, but also through the active suppression by governmental forces, often violent, of any type of reactions and claim organized by the communities and people affected by these investments.

6. Conclusions

Commons grabbing has been described as a constitutive element of the contemporary global agrarian transition. The recent global land rush, catalyzed through transnational agribusiness expansion, is happening at the expenses of the commons. Large-scale land acquisitions resulting from agribusiness development are a key driver of this escalating process (eg. Wily, 2011a, 2011b; Dell'Angelo et al., 2017). There is evidence that commons grabbing is perpetuated through coercive means and violence (Dell'Angelo et al., 2017). Using a different database, this study confirms a similar depiction of coercion and violence associated with agribusiness related commons grabbing. While it has been shown that in many instances of commons grabbing associated with LSLAs, different types of social conflict emerge, it is less clear what forms of social mobilization and organized collective re-actions are taking place to defend the commons against such processes of dispossession. This paper addressed this gap shedding light on some of the fundamental questions associated with the fundamental characteristics, forms and patterns of collective re-actions and mobilizations that are organized in defense of the commons. This is a novel contribution to the scholarship and theory of the commons, which has prevalently focused on the conditions and dynamics of collective actions that are associated with sustainable maintenance of common pool resources, but has placed less focus on the exogenous drivers of change and external pressures. With this paper we describe some emerging features, strategies and patterns associated with the mobilizations that different actors organize as collective reactions against commons grabbing. Considering the concerning levels of dispossession, violence and coercion, the necessity of alliances and coordinated strategies between communities, local and international actors, becomes of fundamental importance in defending the commons.

The recent wave of land grabbing associated with the contemporary global land rush clearly raises some new challenges for the commons. As scholars interested in the commons, in sustainability and social and environmental justice we have to deal with new emerging theoretical challenges to some of the fundamental tenets of the theory of the commons. New challenges are raised but there are also emerging opportunities. In this light, particularly important is the role that social

movements and environmental justice networks could play in commons governance, as well as the role that the collective re-actions organized to defend the commons, will have in producing positive political change and development of social and environmental alternatives (Aydin et al., 2017; Villamayor-Tomas and García-López, 2018) against the advancement of socially and environmentally exploitive systems of natural resources grabbing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare they have no conflict of interests.

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