

World Bank Out of Land!
Against the Privatization and Financialization of People's Territories!
For the Realization of the Right to Land and Agrarian Reform!

May 13, 2024

After a pause of some years, the World Bank is convening another Land Conference in Washington DC from 13-17 May 2024. The theme of this Conference is “Securing Land Tenure and Access for Climate Action” and, according to the World Bank, the Conference “aims to highlight effective strategies for securing land tenure and access in support of climate change mitigation and adaptation.”¹

As organizations of small-scale food producers, Indigenous Peoples, workers, grassroots communities and civil society, we have long recognized and denounced the World Bank as a key actor that participates in and enables land and resource grabbing, while facilitating the privatization of natural resources and their concentration in the hands of self-interested elites and corporations.

Indeed, the World Bank is itself a major land grabber, either by directly investing in projects or by making capital available for multinational investors, including through its private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and its own asset management company.² The Bank further provides guarantees and technical assistance while pushing governments to formulate laws and policies that aim at “enabling the business of agriculture” and other sectors.³ In Africa and elsewhere, the World Bank has been a firm supporter of industrial plantations under the guise of ‘national development,’ which have perversely enriched corporations, dispossessed rural people and communities and laid to waste diverse eco-systems.⁴

Moreover, the World Bank has a long history of pushing a market-based approach to land and natural resource management and governance, promoting the privatization and financialization of land, forests and fisheries, and transforming traditional and customary land rights into market-ready private titles. The Bank’s “Market Assisted Land Reform” with its model of ‘willing buyer-willing seller’ that was pushed in several developing countries increased land inequality and poverty and created conditions for land concentration rather than redistribution.⁵

The World Bank is a key actor of Rogue Capitalism, which transforms land, fisheries, forests and other natural resources into financial assets for speculation, and generates violence, dispossession of people and communities, and the destruction of ecosystems and Mother Earth.⁶

One example is the state of Piauí, in Brazil, where a World Bank project has been used by local and international corporations and financial actors to legalize land grabs and the establishment of monoculture plantations. These have entailed large-scale destruction of the *Cerrado*, a crucial and biodiverse ecosystem, which is the home to millions of people. Indigenous Peoples and rural communities of peasants, small-scale fishers, animal herders and forest people have been the

¹ www.worldbank.org/en/events/2023/10/05/land-conference-2024.

² www.ifcamc.org/portfolio.

³ <https://eba.worldbank.org/en/eba>.

⁴ www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/the-enduring-legacy-of-a-little-known-world-bank-project-to-secure-african-plantations-for-european.

⁵ www.social.org.br/files/pdf/Reform_Policies.pdf.

⁶ www.foodsovereignty.org/roquecapitalism.

targets of violent attacks and have lost their territories. Communities as well as local and international civil society organizations have denounced for years that a World Bank-funded land titling program has been used by the land grabbers to formalize and legalize their illegal activities.⁷ Following intense mobilization of communities and local organizations, the state of Piauí has recently started to issue collective titles to communities under the program, but progress has been extremely slow and communities remain extremely vulnerable to dispossession.

Similarly, the World Bank has been deeply involved in the proliferation of environmentally harmful hydropower projects in Southeast Asia, especially in Laos. The World Bank's private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), has provided equity and loans for several dam projects, while also providing risk-management services and advice to investors. Moreover, the World Bank's political risk insurance and credit enhancement arm, Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA), has provided risk insurance to foreign lenders, in order to reduce the risks inherent in dam construction, thus making the projects attractive and profitable to global investors.⁸ In so doing, the Bank has given very little consideration to the dam projects' significant socio-economic and environmental consequences, in particular the irreversible changes to rivers' hydrology and ecosystems, as well as the displacement of communities and the people's loss of control over the natural resources that are critical to their livelihoods and food sovereignty.⁹ In some dam projects – as in the Bujagali Falls in Uganda – the World Bank has pushed market mechanisms such as “biodiversity offsets” to claim that it is protecting sensitive eco-systems. However, evidence shows that such arrangements do not actually protect the rights of rural communities or the environment, but instead promote further financialization of nature and resource grabbing.¹⁰

While the World Bank seeks to present itself as deeply concerned about climate change, it continues to pour billions of dollars into the fossil fuel industry around the world, despite all its promises to refocus its investments.¹¹ At the same time, it is a major actor in building global carbon markets through numerous carbon trusts and financing facilities.¹² Already in 2008, the World Bank was exposed for issuing bogus carbon credits; i.e., credits that had no environmental benefits, but whose purpose was to greenwash the activities of polluting companies.¹³ In the context of climate finance, the World Bank has become a key actor in the promotion and implementation of market-based climate change mitigation measures, that aim to use people's territories as carbon sinks for big polluters and are set to intensify the financialization of Nature – land, forests, oceans etc. – and, consequently, the dispossession of people and communities. Through MIGA, the World Bank is providing insurance against political risks in voluntary carbon markets,¹⁴ which are central to countries' and corporations' “net zero” pledges that allow ongoing GHG emissions and ecosystem destruction.¹⁵

World Bank-promoted carbon markets and offsetting schemes, so-called “nature-based solutions” and “sustainable finance” are set to exacerbate dispossession and violence against people and their territories.

Land, ecosystems and livelihoods are subordinated to the financialized economy, transforming our territories into ‘assets’ that are then traded on carbon and financial markets.¹⁶ Moreover, recent research has exposed carbon markets' deep systemic flaws, dubious environmental benefits and widespread fraud through “junk” carbon offsets.¹⁷ Recent research has found that at most 12

⁷ www.fian.org/en/press-release/article/world-bank-must-stop-land-grabbing-and-ecological-destruction-in-brazil-2546; <https://social.org.br/en/pub/booklets-english/322-land-speculation-in-the-matopiba-region-and-socio-environmental-impacts>.

⁸ <https://focusweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Offloading-Risks-Avoiding-Liabilities-1-1.pdf>.

⁹ <https://viacampesina.org/en/chayuda-boonrod-dams-are-just-good-for-the-capitalists>.

¹⁰ www.internationalrivers.org/news/blog-world-bank-reneges-on-its-promise-to-protect-key-biodiversity-site-on-ugandas-white-nile; <https://www.foei.org/publication/no-net-loss-of-biodiversity-a-false-solution-and-more-destruction>.

¹¹ www.urgewald.org/world-bank-drives-billions-fossil-fuel-investments.

¹² www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2018/09/carbon-finance-role-world-bank-carbon-trading-markets.

¹³ <https://focusweb.org/is-the-world-bank-profiteering-on-bogus-carbon-credits>.

¹⁴ www.oaklandinstitute.org/blog/carbon-offsets-world-bank-miga-carbon-credit-insurance.

¹⁵ <https://theconversation.com/climate-scientists-concept-of-net-zero-is-a-dangerous-trap-157368>.

¹⁶ www.eurovia.org/publications/ecvc-publication-carbon-farming-a-new-business-model-for-who.

¹⁷ www.oaklandinstitute.org/blog/carbon-offsets-world-bank-miga-carbon-credit-insurance.

percent of the CO2 credits available on carbon markets lead to a real reduction emissions,¹⁸ showing, once again, that these are a false climate solution that has spectacularly failed.

Research has extensively documented the devastating effects of REDD+ projects on communities and their territories,¹⁹ and the proliferation of voluntary carbon markets is set to repeat and intensify these hazards. Tellingly, the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, one of the initiatives under which the World Bank promotes and funds REDD+ projects as well as so-called “climate-smart agriculture” and “smarter land-use planning,” while facilitating public-private partnerships, appears prominently as a sponsor of the upcoming Land Conference and, therefore, is likely to be promoted there.²⁰

The World Bank is a centerpiece of the global financial architecture, which is failing people and the planet, while perpetuating exploitative and colonial structures.

Despite the revamp of its Land Conference and its efforts to present itself as part of the solutions to the harm generated by land grabbing, climate change and ecosystem destruction, it is all too obvious that the World Bank continues to push the same privatization, pro-market agenda as always, thus, serving the interests of corporations and financial capital. The Conference’s narrow focus on “tenure security”, as well as on “land access for mitigation, adaptation, and disaster risk management investments” reveals that the World Bank is not interested in the structural and systemic responses that the world needs in the face of multiple and interconnected crises. Instead, it is using the climate crisis as yet-another pretext to push the commoditization of people’s territories and promote new forms of extraction, exploitation and speculation through financialized false solutions.

The real answer to increasing hunger and malnutrition, climate change, ecosystem destruction and biodiversity loss, and escalating inequalities is to put land and territories under the control and management of people and communities.

This requires comprehensive public policies and programs to ensure the respect and protection of their tenure rights, including collective and customary tenure systems, as well as to ensure the restitution and redistribution of land, forests and aquatic resources to those people and communities who respect and nourish them, especially small-scale food providers, Indigenous Peoples, and other rural people. Our territories are the spaces in which we cultivate food, co-evolve with ecosystems, develop our knowledge and innovations, build communities and livelihoods, and contribute to the wealth and wellbeing of populations. The members of the Working Group on Land, Forests, Water and Territories of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) have been calling for the organization of an International Conference for the Right to Land, Territories and Agrarian Reform, as a multilateral framework to coordinate a global response to land and resource grabbing, and the increasing and unsustainable concentration of land and natural resources in the hands of corporations, financial actors and elites. Therefore, we welcome the initiative taken by the government of Colombia and supported by Brazil to host a second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 2026 (ICARRD+20), as announced during the International Conference on Global Land Grabbing in March 2024.

We, the undersigned organizations, call on states to:

- Stop the World Bank from engaging in land and resource grabs and destruction of territories and ecosystems, both directly and indirectly, by ensuring that all World Bank projects, loans, investments and guarantees that entail or facilitate land, water and forest deals, the violation

¹⁸ www.research-collection.ethz.ch/handle/20.500.11850/620307.

¹⁹ See, for instance: <https://gspp.berkeley.edu/research-and-impact/centers/cepp/projects/berkeley-carbontrading-project/REDD+>; www.uvm.edu/agroecology/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ChappellMJEtAl_FoodSovereignPovertyBiodiversityLA_13.pdf; <https://foe.org/blog/2014-10-nine-reasons-why-redd-is-a-false-folution-friends-of/>; <https://globalforestcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/REDD-and-UC-report-final.pdf>; <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1462901110001334>.

²⁰ www.forestcarbonpartnership.org.

of people's and communities' right to land, and ecosystem destruction are immediately halted, ensuring accountability and reparations in accordance with international law criteria.²¹

- Ensure that the World Bank refrains from influencing global, regional and national policies regarding tenure, land and territories as well as climate change and biodiversity protection.
- Fully implement their obligations under the international human rights framework to realize the rights to food and land of Indigenous Peoples, peasants, small-scale fishers and fish workers, pastoralists, forest people and other communities, including under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination against All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests.
- Adopt effective measures to address the structural drivers of land grabbing and land concentration, protecting people's and communities' tenure rights and enacting redistributive agrarian reform policies.
- Support the organization of a second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 2026 (ICARRD+20), as recently announced by the government of Colombia and supported by Brazil, as the appropriate multilateral space to agree on and coordinate effective measures to stop land grabbing, overcome land concentration and ensure climate, environmental, social and gender justice as well as a just transition to agroecology. The process leading up to such a conference needs to ensure the adequate, effective and autonomous participation of rights holder organizations, and states should provide financial support to enable such a conference.
- Take concrete steps to address the structural root causes of the global debt crisis and democratize the global financial system so that it serves human rights and the public interest, instead of private and corporate interests, including by:
 - Agreeing on a UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation to comprehensively address tax havens, tax abuse by multinational corporations and other illicit financial flows;
 - Establishing a multilateral legal framework under the auspices of the UN that would comprehensively address unsustainable and illegitimate debt, including through extensive debt cancellation;
 - Assessing systemic risks posed by unregulated or inadequately regulated financial sector instruments and actors, including regulation and supervision of the asset management industry (shadow banking), regulation and supervision of credit rating agencies and a new global consensus on capital account management;
 - Eliminating Investor-State-Dispute-Settlement (ISDS) mechanisms and concluding an international legally binding instrument to regulate the activities of transnational corporations and hold them accountable for human rights violations by supporting the ongoing negotiations for a UN Binding Instrument on Business and Human rights.
- Redirect their land and climate change-related funding from the World Bank to real solutions implemented by people and communities in their territories, ensuring effective and adequate participation by rights holders in policymaking and at all stages of projects.

²¹ UN General Assembly, "Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law," A/RES/60/147, 21 March 2006, <http://www.un.org/Docs/asp/ws.asp?m=A/RES/60/147>.

Signatories (as of 16 May 2024):

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