CLIMATEWASH

THE WORLD BANK'S FRESH OFFENSIVE ON LAND RIGHTS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was authored by Frédéric Mousseau and Andy Currier. Research and writing support was provided by Georgie Barkas and additional research by Bella Di Francesco.

The views and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the Oakland Institute alone and do not reflect opinions of the individuals and organizations that have supported the work of the Institute.

Design: Kimberly Schwede

Front Cover: Aerial view of a large burned area in the city of Candeiras do Jamari in the state of Rondônia, Brazil, August, 2019 © Victor Moriyama / Greenpeace

Publisher: The Oakland Institute is an independent policy think tank bringing fresh ideas and bold action to the most pressing social, economic, and environmental issues.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At its May 2024 Land Conference in Washington D.C., the World Bank unveiled plans to transform land tenure in the Global South through its newly launched *Global Program on Land Tenure Security and Land Access for Climate Goals*. Stressing the necessity to improve land administration and land access for climate action, the Bank announced billions of dollars in financing for this new initiative.[1]

The World Bank claims that the commitments made by governments at the Conference of the Parties (COP) for the climate require vast tracts of land to address the climate crisis,[2] as "half of all climate actions relate to land, and, of those, 40 percent require direct land access."[3] According to the Bank, "formalizing" land tenure is needed for these actions, in particular for climate mitigation interventions such as afforestation, carbon neutral and renewable energy projects, and low carbon urban development.[4]

Misusing the climate crisis, the Bank is attempting to breathe new life and political buy-in to an agenda it has tried to push in the Global South for several decades – often met with resistance from those who oppose commodification of land for corporate exploitation. Though it routinely claims that its goal is to improve tenure security, the Bank's approach is to formalize land tenure, i.e. issue land titles to individuals and demarcate state land so it can be made available to the private sector.

To a large extent, the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are about protecting land so forests, peatlands, and prairies are not converted into plantations or pastures. Climate experts do not call for land to be titled but for land rights to be recognized and protected from land grabbing and conversion into activities that will contribute more greenhouse gases (GHG). The IPCC's reports highlight the effectiveness of community management of land to avoid deforestation and of regulations that protect land and biodiversity from increased exploitation. They point as positive news that "over 500 million hectares of forests have been converted to community management with clear property rights in the past two decades."[5]

Droughts intensify as a result of the climate crisis © The Oakland Institute

This report exposes the latest attempt by the World Bank to initiate a global land reform program to "formalize" land tenure by exploiting the climate crisis. It details how the Bank's plans threaten land rights instead of securing them, while promoting false responses to the climate crisis, and actions that will even compound it:

Facilitate the exploitation of critical minerals

The Bank claims that formalizing land tenure is necessary for communities to benefit from the extraction of minerals needed for the energy transition. It, however, skips the question of consent from the communities and governments – assuming that landowners and policy makers will accept the exploitation of natural resources. Its active support to extractive projects that violate land rights – like the mining of lithium in Argentina – raises questions about the Bank's agenda. Moreover, a significant part of what are considered critical minerals are not required for energy transition but are rather sought commodities for unrelated industries, such as telecommunication, aerospace, and defense.

Promote false and ineffective climate solutions

The IPCC has identified a number of effective mitigation measures that require land and made it clear that carbon offsetting is not one of them as it found its "net combined effects on emissions to be negligible."[6] The Bank is rightly supporting afforestation and reforestation interventions but prioritizes financing these through carbon offsetting schemes. With the recent creation of so-called "high integrity" carbon credits, it intends to revive and boost a false climate solution that serves the very same interests causing the climate crisis in the first place.

Open up more land to exploitation

The Bank sees the informality of land tenure as an obstacle to investment and a risk for investors and therefore encourages mapping and titling, mostly for individuals and in some cases for communities. In many Global South countries, land is considered a common good and is managed under customary tenure systems. Once it is titled, the land that remains untitled then becomes public land that governments can allocate for exploitation. The report points to a number of countries where the Bank is financing titling initiatives while encouraging further exploitation and opening of more lands to private sector investments.[7] While the Bank stresses that land tenure reform is urgent and necessary for so-called climate-smart infrastructure and renewable energy investments, the report shows that contrary to the Bank's claims, solar farms – the primary renewable energy investment promoted by the institution – require only marginal amounts of land.

Trigger a structural rural transformation to promote large-scale agriculture in Africa and the Global South

The Bank claims that formalizing land tenure strengthens land rights and equity, but in practice, it promotes land markets as the norm. Once titles are issued, land can be leased, sold, mortgaged, and possibly lost to banks. This paves the way for a structural transformation where small or struggling farmers are pushed out of agriculture, and farms are consolidated into larger units more likely to specialize on monocultures, reliant on fossil fuel-based agrochemicals and mechanization. The African continent is a central target of this transformation. The Bank calls it the "last frontier in global food and agricultural markets,"[8] because it has "more than half of the world's uncultivated but agriculturally suitable land and has scarcely utilized its extensive water resources."[9] To take advantage of such resources, the institution wants to ensure large land concessions are granted to private investors[10] and has announced it will double its agri-finance and agribusiness commitments to US$9 billion annually by 2030.[11] The Bank's efforts to secure land for climate action is coupled with ongoing plans to access land for large-scale agriculture that threatens hundreds of millions of farmers around the world, particularly in Africa.

Commodify land

Despite its recent recognition of the value of customary rights and collective land management, the overall goal of the World Bank remains to promote private ownership and create land markets so that land can be "put into productive use." A review of the Bank's programs around the world shows far more efforts to issue private titles rather than recognize and protect the collective land rights of communities. Several of its programs, like SPLIT in the Philippines, actively destroy pre-existing communal ownership to favor private landholding. The Bank also undermines attempts to address land inequity due to the land grabbing that occurred in colonial times or later, as shown in the case of Malawi.

Cattle ranching in the Amazon plays an outsized role in GHG emissions © Bruno Kelly/Greenpeace

Globally, agri-food systems are responsible for close to a staggering 40 percent of total GHG emissions. If current trends continue, these emissions will prevent the achievement of the goal set by the Paris Agreement to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels[12]– an outcome that will be catastrophic for people and the planet.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to drastically change how the world produces and consumes food. The IPCC has made it clear that agroecology is key to reducing the massive GHG emissions resulting from agriculture but the Bank continues to favor the environmentally destructive fossil fuel-based industrial model of agricultural production.[13] Its land agenda is driven by the idea that larger plots of land would increase investment and productivity, through mechanized agriculture and more intensive use of fossil fuel-based agrochemicals.[14]

The Bank's fresh offensive on land rights highlights an untenable position for the organization. It claims to support action to address the climate crisis while it stands by its core objective, i.e. to cater to corporate and financial powers seeking more economic growth and profits. The Bank's President, Ajay Banga, made clear that this commitment is at the center of its efforts on land administration in a March 2025 statement where he explained "we advance practical reforms – like better tax systems and land rules – that make it easier to do business."[15] This renewed commitment to business was reaffirmed in 2023 with the resuscitation of its Doing Business Report (DBR) under a different name, the B-Ready Project, to push pro-business policy reforms around the world.[16]

The required financing for climate action dramatically fails to materialize, with the world currently spending a fraction of the trillions needed.[17] Whereas rich countries are failing to assume their historic responsibility in the climate crisis and secure financing for mitigation and adaptation, the World Bank justifies its efforts on access to land for climate action by the need to allow private capital to fill the gap.[18] Yet, there are plenty of financial resources available to effectively tackle the climate crisis, for instance, through taxing global wealth and GHG emissions, which would easily secure the trillions of dollars required.[19] Ignoring these solutions, the Bank is hijacking the climate crisis to pursue an agenda that is not about climate but about catering for the financial and corporate interests fueling the crisis.

INTRODUCTION

At its Land Conference in May 2024, the Bank unveiled plans to massively expand its influence on land policy around the world through a newly launched *Global Program on Land Tenure Security and Land Access for Climate Goals*. It announced plans to "ensure 100 million people see greater tenure security... and improve land administration and land access for climate action in 20 countries" over the next five years.[20] Towards these goals, the Bank doubled its investment in the land sector – from US$5 billion to US$10 billion – and doubled the number of countries where it will intervene with land projects.

Is it really possible for the Bank to reconcile its efforts on land tenure to promote global economic growth with the urgent need to curb emissions resulting from this growth?

The Bank justified this investment as being necessary to address the climate crisis, stating that "the land use change actions that governments committed to at the Conference of the Parties 26th meeting (COP26) will require vast tracts of land even as other large swathes of land will be rendered unsuitable for cultivation or habitation due to climate change."[21] It stressed that "half of all climate actions relate to land, and, of those, 40 percent require direct land access"[22] and that "vast tracts of land are needed for climate mitigation investments such as afforestation, carbon neutral and Renewable Energy (RE) projects, and low carbon urban development to which governments committed at COP26."[23]

As the climate crisis intensifies and the failure of governments to act makes the situation more disastrous by the day, the role of a major financial institution like the World Bank can be decisive. With over US$117 billion of financing in 2024 – with 45 percent allegedly dedicated to climate action[24] – the Bank has the financial power to support critical interventions and the leverage to guide and influence governments and private actors.

Analyzing the World Bank's land and climate plans, however, raises a fundamental question given its focus on expanding the private sector by pushing pro-business land reforms around the world. Is it really possible for the Bank to reconcile its efforts on land tenure to promote global economic growth with the urgent need to curb emissions resulting from this growth? This report intends to answer this question through a rigorous analysis of the World Bank's policy documents, country programs, and global initiatives in light of the data and recommendations produced by the IPCC climate experts as well as academics and NGOs.

The first part of the report reviews the *Global Program on Land Tenure Security and Land Access for Climate Goals,* the Bank's climate related interventions, and discusses the claims around the need to access land for climate action. The second section analyses the Bank's plans around land reform for agriculture and the potential tensions with climate goals. The last section draws policy conclusions and recommendations around these plans and programs. In addition to numerous countries referenced across the different sections, five case studies on Argentina, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malawi, and the Philippines, at the end of the report, offer important insights into the Bank's programs and policies at country level.


Monocrop maize farm being sprayed with pesticides in Kenya. Credit: CIMMYT/ Peter Lowe CC BY-NC 2.0

A GLOBAL PROGRAM ON LAND TENURE SECURITY AND LAND ACCESS FOR CLIMATE GOALS

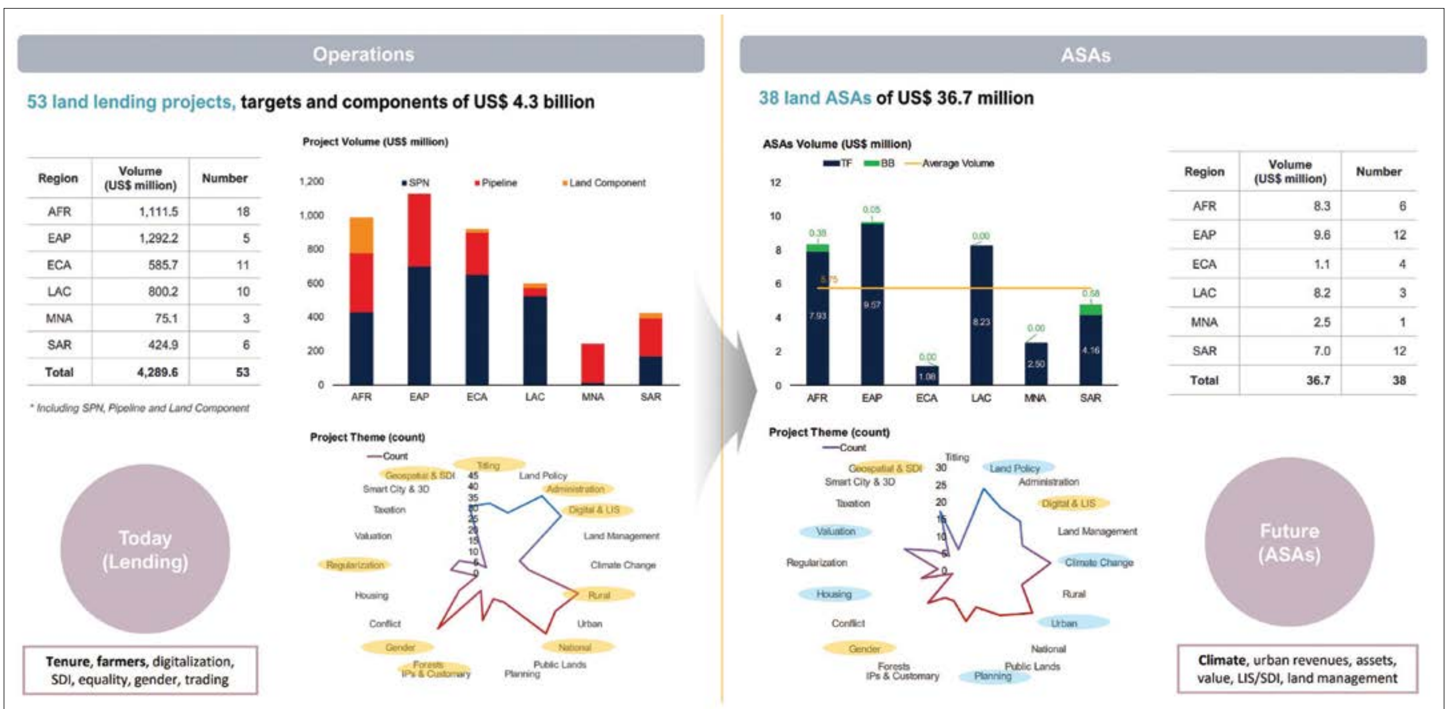
The Bank considers the informal tenure systems prevalent across the Global South as a major barrier to accessing land. According to Mika-Petteri Torhonen, the Bank's lead land specialist, "informality and the lack of secure tenure pose substantial obstacles to identifying and assembling land for climate actions such as land protection, conservation, or repurposing. Finding suitable land for climate investments is risky for both investors and communities where land use, claims, and rights are unrecorded and insecure. Investments in securing tenure and land access are thus urgently needed at scale to achieve these critical climate goals needing land."[25]

The Bank considers that all land should be registered, regardless of its actual purpose or repurpose. A 2024 guidance note makes it clear that "the comprehensiveness of any land administration system is essential. The utility of even the most reliable and transparent system is limited if it only covers part of a country and leaves areas, groups of people, or economic activities subject to the vagaries of informality."[26]

The Bank's goal is to end informality through the formalization of land tenure around the Global South. It intends to accomplish this with action at two levels: Influence policy through policy papers, guidance notes, and other blogs by its "experts" that are then applied at country level through so-called advisory services, i.e. the prescription of reforms to governments. Such land advisory services were deployed in 38 countries as of May 2024. This policy guidance is complemented by land administration programs at country level, which comprised projects in 53 countries as of May 2024 (see Figure 1).[27]

The World Bank claims that the objectives of this global land program are "land protection, conservation, or repurposing" in order to facilitate "climate investments." The following sections discuss the investments that the program is supposed to enable.

Figure 1. Global Portfolio of World Bank Land Programs



Note: ASA are the Bank's Advisory Services and Analytics

Securing Land for the "Transition Minerals" Mining Boom

Alleging an urgent need for "transition minerals" to power the green economy, the World Bank calls for changes in land tenure systems to enable their "sustainable" extraction. It argues that formalizing the land rights of Indigenous and local communities living on these resource-rich lands would allow them to benefit from mining activities.

How Much of the Transition Minerals Are Needed?

According to the Bank, three billion tons of minerals and metals will be needed to "deploy wind, solar and geothermal power, as well as energy storage, required for achieving a below 2°C future," necessitating a global mining investment of approximately US$1.7 trillion.[28] As a result, demand for these key transition minerals including graphite, lithium and cobalt "could increase by nearly 500 [percent] by 2050."[29] A closer examination, however, reveals that green technology will not be the driving factor behind the increase in demand.

World Bank's slide overstating the amount of minerals needed for climate action

The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that total demand for graphite, lithium, and cobalt – from all industries, not just the green tech – will rise by an average of around 207 percent by 2050 if we were to reach net-zero by then.[30] Crucially, demand for these minerals would be created either by sectors that are irrelevant to the green transition (including industries such as aerospace and defense, the automotive industry, chemicals and electronics) or by electric vehicles (EVs) – not by green energy.[31] In fact, the IEA suggests that, in a net-zero by 2050 scenario, green energy would only account for 10.7 percent of the demand for graphite, cobalt and lithium, while EV's would account for 41.79 percent and uses unrelated to the green transition would account for the remaining 47.5 percent.[32]

The estimate of minerals required for EVs is based off the assumption that governments will favor mass private EV ownership over alternative transportation models in efforts to reach net-zero. In reality, demand for minerals coming from EVs could be significantly reduced if policies favor alternatives such as increased investment in public transit systems, car-sharing programs, car clubs and urban planning strategies that promote walkability, cycling, and mixed-use development.[33] The need for grid battery storage could also be significantly reduced if alternative energy storage methods were used.[34]

The massive mineral needs for climate action therefore appear to be significantly overestimated. Needs would be also far less if the above policy options were implemented, along with a reduction of extraction for non-climate related sectors. Despite these facts, the Bank maintains that expanding mining constitutes a "tremendous economic opportunity" and that it is critical to formalize land rights so it is done "well and responsibly."[35]

"Sustainable" Mining Devastates Indigenous Lands

In 2019, the Bank launched the *Climate-Smart Mining (CSM) Initiative* as a public private partnership to help governments achieve "sustainable mineral supply chains, practical solutions for decarbonizing, and improving Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) standards for mining."[36] The CSM Initiative aims to help "resource-rich developing countries benefit from the increasing demand for minerals and metals, while ensuring the mining sector is managed in a way that minimizes the environmental and climate footprint."[37]

The Initiative has developed several toolkits focused on "Forest-smart mining" and "Gender-responsive climate smart mining." The "Forest-smart mining" guidelines explicitly state that strong governance is essential to minimize the environmental and social cost of mining, including the recognition and protection of local community tenure and rights.[38] These toolkits work towards the Bank's goal to "scale up investments in land tenure and administration" as a part of its *Global Program on Land Tenure Security and Land Access for Climate Goals*.[39]

It is estimated that 69 percent of current transition mineral projects are on or near land that qualifies as Indigenous Peoples' or peasant land in the Global South.[40] The Bank's Vice President for Infrastructure, Guangzhe Chen, explains the challenge this overlap presents, saying: "it's estimated that at most half of Indigenous Peoples' land rights are formally recognized,[41] making it difficult to ensure that legitimate landholders are identified and included in investment planning and benefits."[42] To solve this challenge, governments are asked to formalize land rights in areas that will need to be accessed for mining.

While the Bank clearly acknowledges that increased mining for transition minerals will impact Indigenous communities and incorporates supposed safeguards in its mining initiative, several red flags remain. First, Chen openly admits that formally recognizing land rights is merely a step towards accessing minerals. While he highlights the need to include the legitimate landholders in investment planning and benefit sharing, he assumes that the landholders will ultimately accept mining on their lands – completely ignoring they might oppose the environmental destruction, disruptions to livelihoods, and damage to potential areas of cultural significance that this entails. The Bank's justification focused on the alleged urgent need to access these minerals to respond to climate change leaves no room for communities to deny mining on their newly recognized lands.

The 2022 IPCC report specifically warns about the "severe environmental impacts" of mining for these transition minerals and that "often there are few if any redistributive benefits for communities in regions where extraction takes place."[43] Instead of local development, the extraction of strategic minerals such as cobalt, copper and lithium have been linked to violence, human rights abuses, and conflict.[44] For example, a majority of the global cobalt supply – crucial for electric car batteries and energy storage – comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where men, women, and children endure brutal working conditions for extremely low pay.[45] Miners suffer from high levels of toxic metals in their body and severe health issues.[46] Similar abuses are found in many other countries where transition minerals are and might be extracted.[47]

The Bank's CSM Initiative purports to "support the sustainable extraction and processing of minerals and metals to secure supply for clean energy technologies mineral traceability,"[48] but serious limitations to current traceability efforts remain. Efforts to trace minerals in countries impacted by conflict like DRC remain extremely difficult and research shows that traceability schemes "offer a largely technical solution to profoundly political problems."[49] A study cited by

Coltan/Tantalum in DRC is heavily coveted despite widespread labor abuses. Credit: Responsible Sourcing Network, Attribution (CC BY-NC 2.0)

the IPCC concluded that these traceability schemes "may be impossible to fully enforce in practice, and could in the extreme merely become an exercise in public relations rather than improved governance and outcomes for miners."[50]

The close involvement of two of the world's largest mining companies – Rio Tinto and Anglo American – in developing the CSM Initiative raises serious concerns that it is primarily a public relations exercise.[51] Both corporate behemoths have a decades-long track record of human rights and environmental abuses across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.[52] Their involvement in developing the CSM Initiative calls into question the Bank's commitment to making mining of transition minerals truly sustainable and beneficial to impacted communities. For the millions of people around the world impacted by Rio Tinto and Anglo America operations, it represents a clear case of the fox developing the guidelines to protect the henhouse.

The Bank's true commitment to protecting Indigenous and local communities impacted by the transition mineral boom is further questioned by its strong support for the expansion of mining operations with complete disregard for the well-being of these communities. As evidenced in the Argentina case study at the end of the report, the Bank's full support for the fastest growing lithium producing country has come at the expense of Indigenous People. Instead of leveraging its massive financial power to ensure that the government recognizes and protects the land rights of communities living in the mining areas, the Bank is providing billions to a government that is trampling on the safeguards promoted by the CSM Initiative.

The Right to Say "No" to "Sustainable" Mining

In April 2024 at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, a broad coalition of Indigenous representatives from 35 countries issued a declaration stating:

Luwowo Coltan mine near the North Kivu town of Rubaya. Credit: MONUSCO/Sylvain Liechti, "SRSG visits coltan mine in Rubaya," Attribution-ShareAlike (CC BY-SA 2.0)

"We recognize and support the need to end fossil fuel reliance and shift to renewable energy as critical in addressing the climate crisis. However, the current trajectory of the energy transition fails to meet the criteria of justice, social equity and environmental sustainability, particularly from the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples' rights and well-being."[53]

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) enshrines the right for Indigenous communities "to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources," and requires states to obtain their Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) for any project that will affect their lands.[54] In practice, however, these protections are often subverted by governments eager to access these minerals. As the Indigenous coalition warns, "We are alarmed by the grave consequences of mining and deployment of renewable energy development in our territories without our FPIC, violating our rights to self-determination and to our lands, territories, and resources."[55]

To reflect genuine consent, FPIC must include the right for communities to say "No" to mining projects on their lands.[56] Until the World Bank demonstrates that it will truly support this right of refusal, its plans to formalize land rights are nothing but a precursor to help mining companies access minerals at the expense of Indigenous communities. Instead of solely pushing the so-called sustainable mining boom, the Bank should support solutions that minimize the need for mining, and ensure that communities truly consent to and benefit from it.[57]

Reviving the Failed Carbon Markets, A False Climate Solution

Preventing the destruction of forests is critical to addressing the climate crisis and supporting communities who rely on them for livelihoods. The latest IPCC report identified afforestation and reforestation as cost-effective and fast acting solutions that should be broadly supported.[58] At COP26 in 2021, 141 countries committed to halt deforestation, and five governments and 17 foundations pledged a total of US$1.7 billion to "support the advancement of Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' forest tenure rights and greater recognition and rewards for their role as guardians of forests and nature."[59]

The World Bank's current forest and landscapes portfolio is worth approximately US$8.6 billion with major projects in Ethiopia, China, and Mozambique afforesting millions of hectares of land.[60] In recent years, the Bank has refocused its forestry commitment to emphasize protection of community-based tenure systems – a welcome development.[61] However, the problem is that the Bank is intensifying the use of carbon offsetting schemes to finance its afforestation and reforestation actions, despite widespread evidence of carbon markets being a false climate solution. A meta-analysis of studies on the actual impact of global carbon markets cited by the IPCC found their "net combined effects on emissions to be negligible."[62]

In September 2023, the Bank announced "ambitious plans for the growth of high-integrity global carbon markets,"[63] suggesting that the term "high-integrity" would somehow address the widespread flaws and frauds reported in recent years.[64] The Bank is now doubling-down to "make carbon markets work" through a new *Carbon Market Engagement Roadmap*[65] to "scale effective global carbon markets."[66] It claims it will "be a win-win for people and the planet, potentially generating millions, if not billions, for countries on the pathway to low carbon development."[67]

In 2008, the Bank started the *Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF)*, a "global partnership of governments, businesses, civil society, and Indigenous Peoples' organizations focused on reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, forest carbon stock conservation, the sustainable management of forests, and the enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries – activities commonly referred to as REDD+."[68] Since then, the FCPF has supported 47 countries to develop large-scale programs"[69] and 15 countries currently have emission reductions payment agreements with the Bank, resulting in US$90 million of "results based payments that are being shared with communities."[70]

In addition to this relatively limited return for the people, the Bank's claims about the benefits of expanding carbon markets ignore serious issues with this so-called climate solution. The FCPF operates on the Voluntary Market,[71] which allows polluters to "offset" their emissions by purchasing carbon credits from projects that supposedly remove or reduce carbon dioxide emissions. In their two decades of existence, voluntary carbon markets have completely failed to reduce carbon emissions because of the deep systemic flaws, undermining efforts to achieve the Paris Agreement objectives.[72] A study by the European Commission, for instance, revealed that 85 percent of offset projects under the UN's Clean Development Mechanism from 2013 to 2020 failed to uphold environmental integrity and reduce emissions.[73] In recent years, the voluntary carbon market has come under fire because of greenwashing and "junk" carbon offsets that do nothing to genuinely reduce emissions.[74]

Not only ineffective in reducing emissions, carbon offsetting has repeatedly trampled upon the rights of Indigenous and local communities.[75] Around the world, communities have become the victims of "carbon cowboys" who lure them with promises of substantial financial gains from carbon credit sales.[76] These unscrupulous actors frequently coerce local groups into signing opaque and exploitative deals, seizing their carbon and land rights for periods that can last over 100 years.[77] Research shows that the quest for land suitable for carbon offsets in the Global South risks "driving large-scale land acquisitions, which overlook local rights and needs, bringing negative local economic, social and environmental impacts and a failure to recognise procedural justice or deliver sustainable development."[78]

While the voluntary carbon market is touted by the Bank as a vital climate financing source, host countries, and local communities often only receive a small fraction of the revenues made by foreign developers and financial intermediaries.[79] In Papua New Guinea, for instance, communities in East New Britain claim to have received none of the US$18 million made by a US firm from the sale of 1.3 million carbon credits, which were allegedly issued without their consent.[80] In another case, oil giant BP purchased 1.5 million carbon credits from Mexican villagers at a paltry price of US$4 per credit.[81] These villagers worked for several years to safeguard forests, only to receive a meager payment equivalent to little more than a week's worth of salary per person.

Beyond project developers, money pledged to carbon offsetting projects is siphoned away by a complex network of predatory actors, including standard-setting bodies, registries, traders, brokers, and investors.[82] Many of these entities have intertwined financial and political interests tied to the production and sale of carbon credits. Speculation on carbon markets is also pervasive, as documented by the intelligence firm Allied Offsets, which identified nearly 250 projects where brokers resold credits for at least three times their original purchase price.[83] As a result, a significant portion of the financing intended for climate mitigation projects and local communities only enriches financial intermediaries – primarily wealthy individuals, firms, and organizations based in the Global North.[84]


Communities protecting forests in PNG have not benefitted from past carbon credit schemes © Paul Hilton / Greenpeace

The Bank's commitment to "high-integrity" markets outlined in its Carbon Market Engagement Roadmap includes plans to partner with Verra,[85] the world's leading carbon credit certifier. In 2023, an explosive investigation by The Guardian, Die Zeit and SourceMaterial exposed that more than 90 percent of Verra's rainforest offset credits are likely to be "phantom credits" that do not represent genuine carbon reductions.[86] The findings dealt a massive blow to voluntary carbon markets and the high-profile companies including Shell, Gucci, Salesforce, and easyJet that had purchased rainforest offsets approved by Verra.[87]

The World Bank's role in driving carbon markets has heavily influenced climate financial allocations in recent years. It has played a leading role in increasing capacity in more than 60 countries and mobilizing US$4.8 billion in "carbon funds."[88] The IPCC notes that the "leadership role of the international 'heavyweight' World Bank"[89] has added credibility to various carbon market partnerships and potentially led to the "greater involvement of powerful finance ministries/ministers," in these schemes.[90]

Despite the litany of issues with carbon markets, the Bank is playing a leading role shepherding governments to them. Formalizing land tenure in the Global South to expand this false solution is highly problematic. Before anyone else, it serves the interests of wealthy countries and corporations – historically responsible for the climate crisis – to continue their GHG emissions and conveniently offset them, thereby passing the burden onto the Global South.

Climate-smart Infrastructure and Renewable Energy Investments

The third area for which the Bank considers land tenure reform necessary relates to so-called climate-smart infrastructure and renewable energy investments. "Access to land is a gatekeeping challenge that stands in the way of many renewable energy investments at a time when mitigating and adapting to climate change is becoming increasingly urgent, especially in developing countries."[91] The key sector for renewable energy put forward by the Bank is solar energy,[92] which it claims "requires a lot of space."[93]

This justification is highly fallacious and has been strongly debunked by scientists. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has shown that the land requirement for scaling up solar technology is marginal. Solar plants covering only about 0.4 percent of the land area of the United States could produce all the electricity the nation consumes.[94] MIT notes that "this is roughly half of the land area currently devoted to producing corn for ethanol, which contributes just under 7% of the energy content of U.S. gasoline." It also estimates that just using existing rooftop area within the US would provide enough surface area to supply roughly 60 percent of the nation's projected 2050 electricity needs and observes that solar installations do not necessarily monopolize land area, but can share land with other uses, such as pastures.[95]

The Bank rightly promotes minigrid systems for renewable energy production, which are small-scale solar parks that supply electricity to a small, localized group of users. Its own research confirms that land required for such systems represent a "relatively small amount of land" and notes that "land is often provided gratis by communities or local governments as part of agreements at project inception." It only found "anecdotal evidence" of issues in obtaining rights to suitable land.[96]

When stressing the need to access land for renewable energy and infrastructure development, the Bank lumps together renewable energy that requires limited amounts of land with infrastructure development, which does not constitute climate action but is about stimulating economic activities and private investment. The Bank's Guidance Note on Access to Land in South Asia "not only underscores the importance of improving land access but also highlights the pathways towards leveraging land assets, creating value, and capturing its dividends."[97] For the Bank, "investing in better access to state and public lands for development and improved management of these has enormous potential for providing an impetus for accelerated growth, diversification of the economy, and increased public revenues."[98] The Bank's lead land specialist explains:

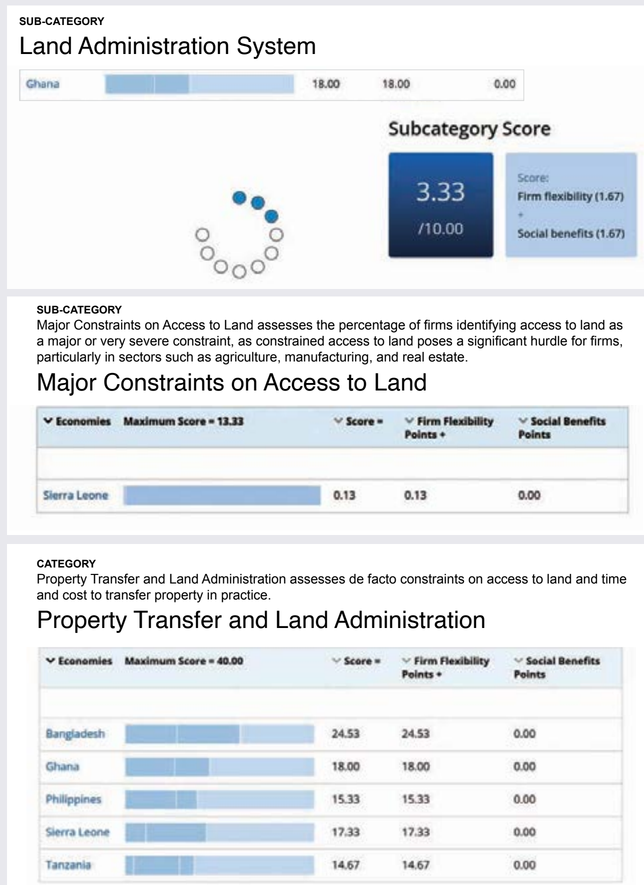
"To enable infrastructure development, it's vital to identify who owns the land and if there are any other property rights over it... Land ownership or long-term lease agreements provide security to lenders and investors, making it easier to secure financing for infrastructure projects... Collaboration and partnerships between the private sector, government agencies, and local communities enable stakeholders to work together to identify suitable land for infrastructure development, address land tenure issues, and ensure the participation of local communities in decision making processes through participatory land registration programs."[99]

Despite sugar-coating language of participation, when the end result is transferring land to infrastructure projects, the extent to which communities are actually consulted is extremely constrained. As evidenced by a number of its own documents, the Bank's agenda is about intensifying private sector-led exploitation, a key driver of the climate crisis.

B-Ready Resuscitates the Doing Business Report

The Bank ended its Doing Business Report (DBR) in 2021 after internal audits and reviews revealed data manipulation for political purposes.[100] The DBR ranked countries on the "ease of doing business," i.e. on regulatory changes and reforms that make them more attractive to private investors.[101] The reforms encouraged by the World Bank included lowering corporate taxes, slashing environmental safeguards, social and labor standards, cutting administrative procedures, and removing restrictions to trade and business. This impacted governance in countries since rankings influenced the flow of international aid and "promises" of foreign investment, economic growth, and development.[102]

In May 2023, the DBR was resuscitated and relaunched under a different name, the B-Ready Project. In 2024, the first B-Ready report covered 50 countries, to be expanded to 100 countries in 2025 and 180 by 2026. Despite some changes to tackle the flaws of the DBR, the concept remains the same, i.e. guiding pro-business policy reforms. Like the DBR, the project scores countries on how national regulations operate in favor of the "ease of doing business" and encourages governments to conduct reforms accordingly. For the Bank, "B-READY is a powerful tool that policymakers can use to pinpoint areas for improvement and guide reforms to create a stronger private sector." On October 2, 2024, Indermit Gill, Chief Economist and Senior Vice-President of the World Bank, presented the new project with the promise that "B-ready will save the world."[103]


SUB-CATEGORY

Land Administration System

Ghana		18.00	18.00	0.00

Subcategory Score

3.33 /10.00

Score: Firm flexibility (1.67) + Social benefits (1.67)

SUB-CATEGORY

Major Constraints on Access to Land assesses the percentage of firms identifying access to land as a major or very severe constraint, as constrained access to land poses a significant hurdle for firms, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and real estate.

Major Constraints on Access to Land

Economies	Maximum Score = 13.33	Score =	Firm Flexibility Points +	Social Benefits Points
Sierra Leone		0.13	0.13	0.00

CATEGORY

Property Transfer and Land Administration assesses de facto constraints on access to land and time and cost to transfer property in practice.

Property Transfer and Land Administration

Economies	Maximum Score = 40.00	Score =	Firm Flexibility Points +	Social Benefits Points
Bangladesh		24.53	24.53	0.00
Ghana		18.00	18.00	0.00
Philippines		15.33	15.33	0.00
Sierra Leone		17.33	17.33	0.00
Tanzania		14.67	14.67	0.00

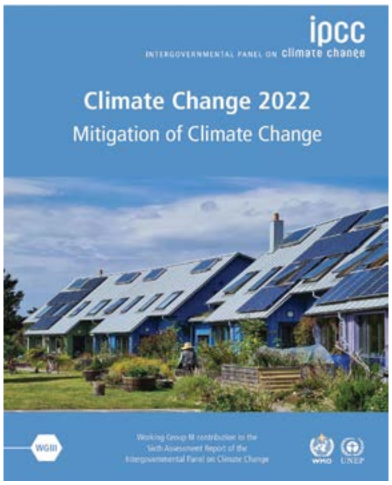
Screenshots of land related indicators in the 2024 B-Ready report

With the DBR, climbing the rankings for their pro-business reforms had become the focus of many governments and tended to replace actual policy making, resulting in a race to the bottom for countries to be more attractive to corporations.[104] Despite some changes, the spirit of the new instrument remains the same – "benchmarking countries against peers."[105] The good practices it promotes include "reduction of business entry restrictions, establishment of trade facilitation measures, prohibition of anti-competitive agreements,"[106] which, like the DBR, are rooted in a free trade, pro-business model, that discourages governments from regulating the economy and restricting the activities of private actors.

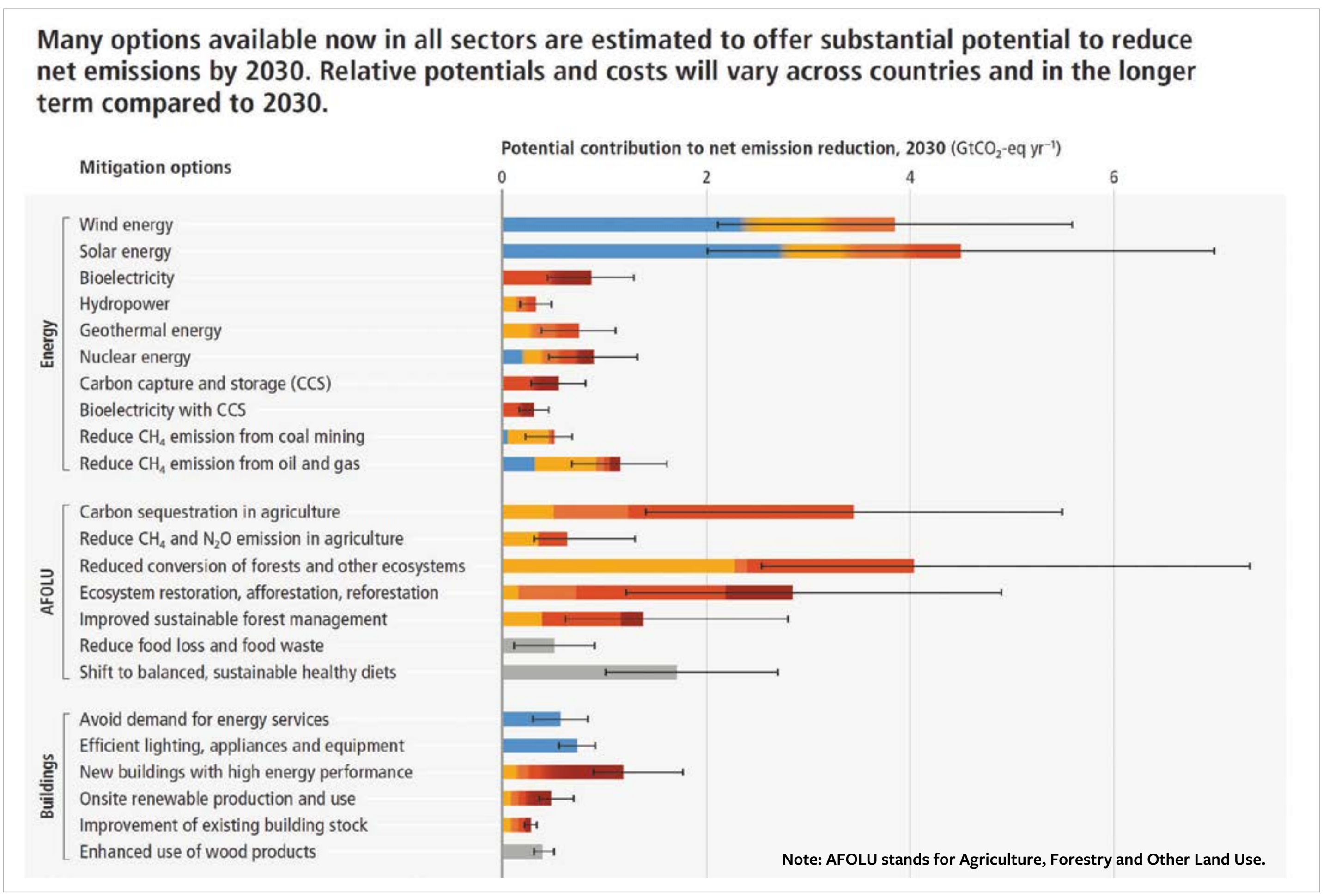
B-Ready includes specific considerations around land that contribute towards the Bank's push to "formalize" land tenure. The project's Concept Note thus stresses that "the quality and transparency of land administration are ... vital in eradicating information asymmetry and increasing market efficiency."[107] The B-ready requires countries to use or set up "secure and reliable land registration systems," including formal registries and cadasters, for the establishment of land markets and to facilitate transactions through land sales or leases. It scores countries on the restrictions they have for accessing land, for instance on land leasing or owning land by foreign firms, or constraints in obtaining environmental permits.

Factcheck: Does Climate Action Require Reforming Land Tenure Around the World?

As shown above, the World Bank's claim that reforming land tenure in the Global South is a necessary step to address the climate crisis is questionable on many grounds. The 2022 report from the IPCC Working Group III does state that "land-based mitigation measures represent some of the most important options currently available" that are both cost-effective and can be swiftly implemented.[108] The report also points out that land-based solutions are the only ones "in which large-scale carbon dioxide removal may currently and at short term be possible (e.g. through afforestation/reforestation or soil organic carbon management)." Other land-based solutions listed by the IPCC include the protection of forests, the restoration and conservation of natural ecosystems and biodiversity, improved sustainable forest management, agroforestry, and practices that reduce CH4 and N2O emissions in agriculture from livestock and soil.[109]



The IPCC lists successful measures to enable such interventions, including "Establishing and respecting tenure rights and community forestry, improved agricultural management and sustainable intensification, biodiversity conservation, payments for ecosystem services, improved forest management and wood chain usage." It also refers to a number of initiatives that have been implemented successfully to curb the overexploitation of natural resources: "Regulations on land use include direct controls on how land is used, zoning, or legally set limits on converting land from one use to another. Since the early 2000s, Brazil has for instance deployed various regulatory measures to slow deforestation, including enforcement of regulations on land-use change in the legal Amazon area. Enforcement of these regulations, among other approaches is credited with encouraging the large-scale reduction in deforestation and associated carbon emissions after 2004."[110] Climate experts also see as "positive signs" that "over 500 million hectares of forests have been converted to community management with clear property rights in the past two decades."



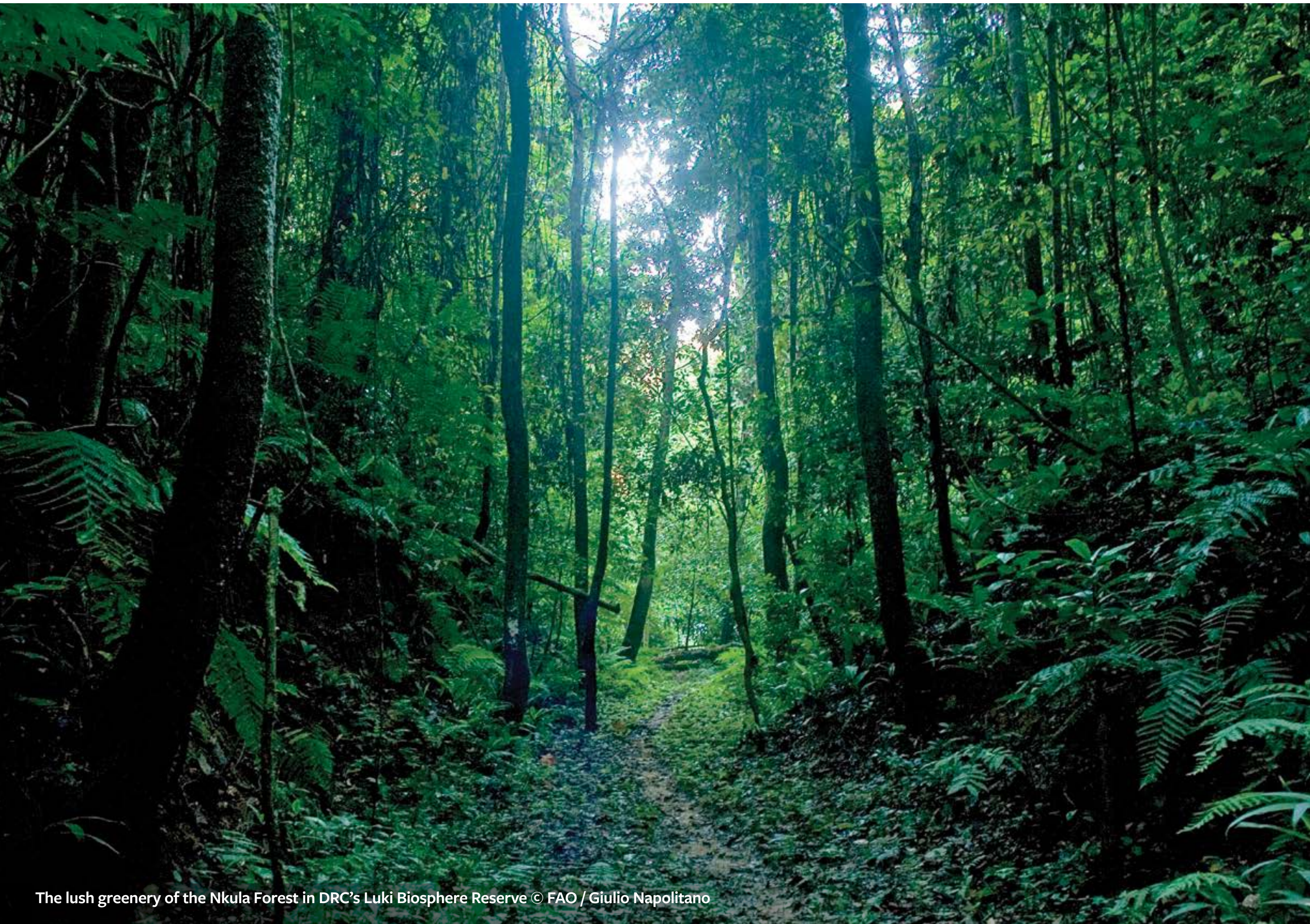
Climate experts stress that "unclear property rights and tenure insecurity undermine the incentives" to put in place such effective mitigation measures. However, they make clear that the recognition and formalization of property rights is about protecting land so forests, peatlands, and prairies are not converted into plantations or pastures. They underline the effectiveness of community management, and do not call for land to be titled but for land rights to be recognized and protected from land grabbing and conversion.

The IPCC stresses "that land supports many ecosystem services on which human existence, wellbeing and livelihoods ultimately depend" and points to the "over-exploitation of land resources" as "driving considerable and unprecedented rate of biodiversity loss, and wider environmental degradation."[111] Climate experts highlight various forms of this overexploitation – changes of land use for the expansion of pastures for livestock and crops for animal feed that have been key drivers of deforestation and increased emissions. The IPCC experts call for "urgent action to reverse this trend."

The World Bank appears to have a totally different approach as it views the formalization of land tenure as means to allow the exploitation of land. The next section details how the institution misuses the climate crisis to pursue its old agenda of land privatization across the Global South. A central goal of this agenda is the expansion of large-scale agriculture, clearly at odds with the IPCC recommendations, which call for reversing the expansion of land conversion for large-scale agriculture, ranching, and overexploitation.

"Since the early 2000s, Brazil has for instance deployed various regulatory measures to slow deforestation, including enforcement of regulations on land-use change in the legal Amazon area. Enforcement of these regulations, among other approaches is credited with encouraging the large-scale reduction in deforestation and associated carbon emissions after 2004."

– IPCC Working Group III 2022 report



The lush greenery of the Nkula Forest in DRC's Luki Biosphere Reserve © FAO / Giulio Napolitano

OPENING LANDS TO FOREIGN "INVESTORS" AND AGRIBUSINESSES

A Road Map to Expand Large-Scale Agriculture

The Bank's plan to secure land for climate action is coupled with its ongoing plans to promote large-scale agriculture that threatens hundreds of millions of farmers around the world, particularly in Africa. On October 23, 2024, the World Bank announced it will double its agri-finance and agribusiness commitments to US$9 billion annually by 2030 with a goal to "create a comprehensive ecosystem for the industry."[112] Under this renewed effort, it will help countries develop regulations and standards, advise on "land tenure solutions" and will conduct activities that are inherently geared towards large-scale agriculture, such as "de-risking" investment.

This announcement comes just months after the *Global Program on Land Tenure Security and Land Access for Climate Goals* was launched. Together, they will result in the Bank putting additional billions of dollars towards coercing countries in the Global South to implement policies intended to facilitate the transfer of land away from smallholders, Indigenous communities, pastoralists to large-scale agribusiness and investors.

Whereas the Bank's push for large-scale agribusiness is global, the African continent is its central target. The Bank sees Africa as the "last frontier in global food and agricultural markets."[113] It claims it has "more than half of the world's uncultivated but agriculturally suitable land and has scarcely utilized its extensive water resources."[114] To take advantage of such resources, the Bank has called in the past for large land concessions to be granted to private investors: "While a smallholder model has a proven track record in promoting equitable development, in some situations access to significant tracts of land must accompany agribusiness investments."[115]

In 2024, in a fresh push to conquer the last frontier, two of the Bank's leading economists published *Land Policies for Resilient and Equitable Growth in Africa*.[116] It outlines how African countries should implement policy changes so that land institutions and policies help them "respond to the challenges of climate change, urban expansion, structural transformation, and gender equality."

The policy paper diagnoses that attempts to promote large-scale, land investment in agriculture in the recent past largely failed because "ways to transfer land to investors were often centralized, nontransparent, and noncompetitive."[117] This view is aligned with past efforts by the Bank to clear the way for outside investors to access land, as seen most prominently with the now defunct Enabling the Business of Agriculture project (see Box p.19).[118]

Expanding commercial agriculture is a main focus of the Bank's land reform. Combine harvester in Ukraine © FAO / Anatolii Stepanov

The Bank's strategy to open more land to large-scale agriculture is centered on the formalization of land tenure systems through regulatory reforms, the development of cadasters and land registers, and the issuance of land titles and certificates. Such formalization is expected to make more land accessible for large-scale agriculture in two main ways:

1. Mapping so that public land can be clearly demarcated and made available by governments to investors

The Bank encourages governments to demarcate public land so that it can be transferred to private investors and put into "productive use." Referring to public land, it suggests that "disposal of underperforming assets to the private market is a better option than holding on to them."[119] The Bank considers that fairness in access to this public land would be ensured by selling it through transparent auction sales.[120] In a world rampant with inequality, this is likely to drive further land concentration as the highest bidders are likely to be the most powerful economic interests – corporations and wealthy individuals.

Moreover, in practice, what the Bank claims is underutilized public land is actually a critical resource relied upon by local communities. Most public land in the Global South is used by people as a common good, governed by customary laws.[121] Communally managed natural resources such as water, forests, savannas, and grazing lands are essential for the livelihoods of millions of rural poor. Calls to implement policies that increase the competitiveness, transparency, and decentralization of transferring this land away from local communities is therefore a direct threat to their livelihoods and survival.

2. Providing land titles or certificates to create land markets

Though the Bank pretends that "secure property rights reduce expropriation risk" and allow landowners to invest and improve agricultural productivity, the main goal of issuing titles and certificates is to create land markets that allow land to be sold, leased, or mortgaged. According to the Bank, titles and certificates allow for the use of land "as collateral to access credit." The assertion that secure tenure can facilitate access to credit has been largely disproven, as banks remain unwilling to lend to the poor.[122] A comprehensive literature review found "no support" for a link between secure tenure and access to credit.[123] Conversely, the ability to use land as collateral makes it possible for banks to legally take over the land if farmers experience a difficult harvest year and are unable to pay back their loan or mortgage – a phenomenon all too common amidst today's climatic realities.[124] In Western economies, with "formal" land tenure systems, stories of farmers losing their land to banks and creditors abound. Expanding this model to the Global South creates a legal avenue for increased land dispossession, land concentration, and land grabbing. Essentially, people are encouraged to buy into a system that does little to serve them in the best of times and creates legal means of stealing their land amidst hardship.

The conjunction of the above two sets of efforts to formalize land tenure constitutes additional threats to land rights. In Madagascar – considered exemplary by the Bank in terms of land reform – after twenty years of its involvement and over ten years of investment to provide land certificates to individual landowners, in 2021 the Malagasy Parliament passed a law removing the presumption of ownership for individuals occupying untitled land.[125] The law, eventually amended following public outcry, put 80 percent of the Malagasy population at risk of eviction and land grabbing (see case study at the end of the report).[126] The risk is thus high that once titles or certificates are awarded, the remaining unregistered land is considered state property and made available to investors.

The policy guidance that the Bank provides to governments is built on a blatant contradiction. Whereas it says that formalizing land rights and institutions is critical to secure people's land tenure, it also promotes access to more land for large-scale agriculture and the consolidation of farmland into bigger farms.[127]

Industrial plantations in Africa will expand under the Bank's vision of "development" © The Oakland Institute

Two decades of efforts to open land to land grabbers and industrial agriculture

In the last two decades, large-scale land acquisitions have intensified in the Global South,[128] often involving forced evictions, widespread human rights violations, environmental degradation, increased food insecurity, and the destruction of livelihoods.[129] But these land grabs have been met with resistance by millions of farmers, pastoralists, and Indigenous Peoples who oppose the takeover of their ancestral land. Many have been successful in delaying, disrupting, or stopping the establishment of plantations, as well as logging projects or "conservation" initiatives.[130] The land targeted by so-called investors is often used by local people who might not have formal property titles. Legally, it is typically either public or state land and/or land on which local communities claim customary rights. This issue was recognized by the World Bank, which considers that "undocumented [land] rights pose challenges and risks to investors," and constitute therefore an obstacle to foreign investment.[131]

Protest against the Bank's ranking program, DC, 2014 © The Oakland Institute

This is what led the Bank to embark upon an unprecedented effort to reform land tenure in the Global South, particularly Africa. In 2013, the World Bank launched the Enabling the Business of Agriculture (EBA) project, aimed at guiding pro-business reforms in the agriculture sector, including removing "legal barriers" for agribusinesses.[132] To regulate countries' land tenure arrangements and "enhance productivity of land use," the Bank prescribed formalizing private property rights, easing the sale and lease of land for commercial use, systematizing the sale of public land by auction to the highest bidder, and improving procedures for expropriation.[133] Suggesting that low-income countries do not manage public land in an effective manner, the Bank prescribed the privatization of public land as the way forward, telling governments they should transfer public lands with "potential economic value" to commercial use and private ownership, so that the land can be put to its "best use."[134] The EBA also pushed for the formalization of private land ownership as a way to make land a "transferable asset" to spur agribusiness investments in capital-intensive agriculture and increase productivity.[135]

The project represented an aggressive push to privatize land and facilitate private interests' access to land in the Global South, which would inevitably encourage increased concentration of land in the hands of a few, along with the dispossession of the rural poor who rely on it for their food security and livelihoods.[136]

The land reform agenda of the Bank was massively rejected by experts and civil society organizations from around the world who mobilized to stop it. Initiated in 2014, the 280-organization strong Our Land Our Business Campaign – comprised of NGOs, unions, farmers, and consumer groups from over 80 countries – rejected the EBA and its model, the Doing Business Report (DBR), which had a broader scope.[137]

The campaign to end both initiatives was successful as it led several EBA donors to end their financing and eventually forced the World Bank to end the EBA report in 2019.[138] Another victory for people and the planet came soon after, when the DBR was ended in September 2021.[139]

However, the end of these ranking programs did not mark the end of the Bank's efforts to expand pro-corporate land policies across the Global South, which have been resuscitated in various forms since 2023 by the institution, now using climate crisis as a justification.

An Explicit Agenda to Drive African Farmers Out of Agriculture

Ultimately, the Bank's path to "equitable growth" advances a structural transformation driving small farmers out of the agricultural sector. *Land Policies for Resilient and Equitable Growth in Africa* explicitly states that encouraging the lease of land "can support structural transformation and a gradual shift of employment from agriculture to non-agriculture."[140] "Structural transformation," mentioned in the document 71 times, is a key goal of the World Bank, for whom formalizing land rights is ultimately geared towards moving farmers out of the sector, not protecting their rights. The Bank praises for instance the land reform in Mexico, where the provision of land certificates to rural families resulted in the migration of villagers, including significant international migration, and consolidation of farms into bigger units.[141] "By making land transfers legally possible and having a mechanism to register them, the program fostered structural transformation via outmigration and – through market-based consolidation – affected productivity. After getting a certificate, households were 28 percent more likely to have a member migrate…"[142]

"Structural transformation" is a key goal of the World Bank, for whom formalizing land rights is ultimately geared towards moving farmers out of the sector, not protecting their rights.

The Bank justifies this path with the overarching theory that "with economic development, the share of individuals employed in agriculture decreases; farm size, labor productivity, and wages increase; and capital tends to substitute for labor."[143] The institution therefore intends to move hundreds of millions of farmers away from agriculture, stating, "Beyond increasing security and transferability of rural land in the longer term, policies that can support structural transformation along these lines will include improving the rural population's skills and relaxing restrictions on rural-urban labor mobility and migrants' ability to acquire urban land."[144]

Farmers in Madagascar threatened by the Bank's plans to transform agriculture © The Oakland Institute

Recognizing or Undermining Collective Land Rights?

In recent years, the World Bank has finally recognized the significance of collective land rights, acknowledging they are "important for Indigenous Peoples and marginalized groups" and offer "huge potential for protecting forests and other natural resources to combat climate change."[145]

This recognition has trickled into a few land administration projects, which consider communal land management practices. In Indonesia, the focus of the Bank's programs have recently shifted from individual titling to protecting Indigenous collective rights (see case study at the end of the report). The Bank has also attempted to incorporate Indigenous land rights in Cambodia, as its *Land Allocation for Social and Economic Development Project III (LASED III)* expands on LASED I and II by offering communal land titling and "Social Land Concessions" instead of just private titles.[146] In Peru, the Bank's 2015-2021 project, Saweto Dedicated Grant Mechanism, aimed to "register titles of lands owned by the Indigenous peoples and native communities under the national legal framework."[147] The Bank's *Land Tenure Improvement Project* in Tanzania supports the issuance of Certificates of Customary Right of Occupancy (CCROs), which only allow land transfer when the buyer is from the village or is an inheritor, protecting communal land from being transferred to outside investors.[148]


Co-operative farms in the Phillippines are being broken up by the Bank's titling project © David Bacon

These efforts, however, remain limited as majority of the Bank's projects continue to prioritize individual land tenure. While issuance of 500,000 CCROs in Tanzania is positive, it is a small part of a broader intervention, which will issue over two million individual land certificates or licenses.[149] Many Bank projects, for instance in Madagascar, Ethiopia, or Rwanda, prioritize individual land tenure over collective.[150]

Even when apparently protecting Indigenous rights, some of the Bank's programs actively undermine such rights. In Peru, for example, land titles are only issued for areas that are residential, agricultural, or used for livestock. Forests, on the other hand, are not given formal titles but licenses for their exploitation. As a result, Indigenous Peoples are only able to have land rights recognized for areas they are settled in, not areas they hunt or move in.[151] As the Bank's program aims to define the physical boundaries of the Indigenous People's land, it leaves the remainder of their traditional land vulnerable to legal takeover for logging and plantations.[152] In Indonesia, the Bank has recently shifted its focus from individual titling to the protection of Indigenous rights but it continues at the same time to finance and promote pro-business policies for economic growth, which irrevocably will threaten land rights through more expansion of oil palm plantations (see case study at the end of the report).

Disregard for collective land management practices is taken a step further in the Philippines as the Bank's *Support to Parcelization of Land for Individual Titling (SPLIT)* is dividing co-operatives into small plots for individuals. After decades of progress toward redistributive land reform, the project is fueling land loss, corporate takeover, and deepening inequality (see case study at the end of the report).[153]

COUNTERING THE BANK'S LAND GRABBING AGENDA

A significant part of the Bank's justification for the formalization of land tenure relates to urbanization, i.e. to address land issues amidst growing urban sprawl in the Global South and to promote low carbon urban development. Though the report does not cover this specific aspect, it is a growing challenge that requires significant action in terms of land administration, where the World Bank can play its part. However, the Bank's vision for rural areas and its plans favoring structural transformation of rural societies will only amplify the problem it is trying to address, by pushing more rural poor to the cities, within their countries or abroad. Whereas managing urban land is becoming more overwhelming for countries and municipalities, the Bank is pouring gasoline on the fire with its land tenure reforms.

The Bank's efforts will exacerbate the climate crisis. Pushing for land to be consolidated into large farms and made available to investors for industrial agriculture goes against the recommendations made by experts who have widely documented how devastating the model is for the climate and biodiversity. But as discussed earlier, other paths exist to protect land for agriculture and climate action.

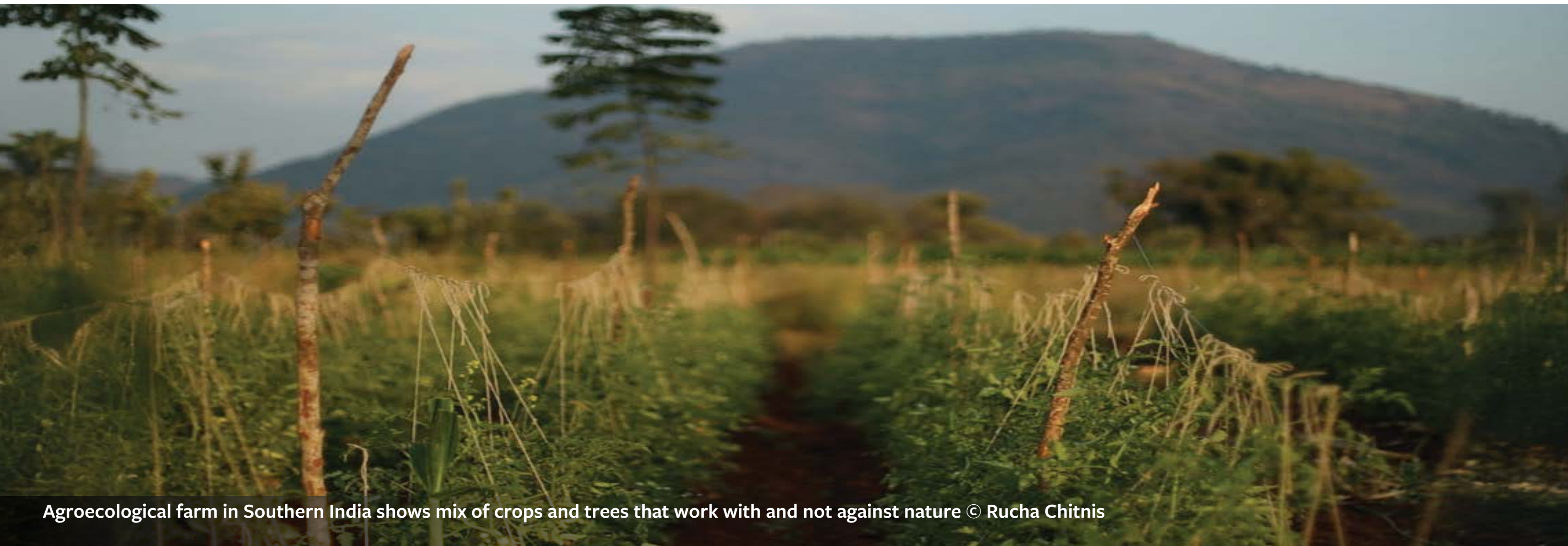
Agroecology: The Only Path for Agriculture Amidst the Climate Crisis

Globally, agri-food systems are responsible for close to a staggering 40 percent of total GHG emissions. If current trends continue, these emissions will prevent the achievement of the 1.5°C target and threaten the achievement of the 2°C target by the end of the century[154] – a catastrophic outcome for people and the planet.

Despite the urgent need to change how the world produces and consumes food, the World Bank is instead focusing its efforts on expanding the environmentally destructive,[155] large-scale industrial agriculture model. To accomplish this goal, its support for land parcelization, titling, and the creation of land markets follows the weak assumption that commodification of land will improve investment, development, and increase productivity. Conversely, the World Bank falsely claims that low agricultural productivity in the Global South is mainly due to informal land rights, ignoring deeper systemic issues and local realities (see case studies). As summarized in this report, the Bank's efforts around land reform are facilitating the expansion of industrial agriculture, which is not only escalating the climate crisis but also actively constraining the growth of agroecology – a proven model to increase productivity and climate resilience without the social and environmental risks.[156]

Agroecology works with nature instead of against it to optimize the interactions between plants, animals, and people to naturally improve soil health and biodiversity.[157] Centered on local and traditional knowledge, it produces food in way that benefits ecosystems and communities. This approach reduces or eliminates reliance on energy-intensive synthetic inputs like nitrogen fertilizers, a significant contributor to agricultural GHG while creating "carbon sinks" to pull carbon from the air.[158] Moreover, it enhances resilience to climate variability, including droughts, floods, and extreme temperature.[159] By prioritizing localized production and consumption, agroecological food systems also shorten food chains and minimize carbon emitted during transportation and processing.[160]

Agroecology provides communities with rich and diverse food supplies that are largely insulated from commodity price shocks that can decimate farmers who are reliant on monocrops.[161] Around the world, agroecology has successfully reduced hunger and boosted farmer incomes.[162] International recognition of these benefits continues to grow. For instance, the IPCC's Sixth Assessment report affirms with confidence that the "adoption of agroecology principles and practices will be highly beneficial to maintaining healthy, productive food systems under climate change."[163]



Agroecological farm in Southern India shows mix of crops and trees that work with and not against nature © Rucha Chitnis

Tackling agricultural productivity challenges in the Global South and mitigating climate change does not necessitate the formalization of land rights as envisioned by the World Bank, because agroecology thrives within existing customary land tenure systems. Unlike industrial agriculture, agroecological practices often align with communal stewardship and equitable resource access inherent in these systems. Because of this, the restitution of land to Indigenous and local communities, grounded in their traditional land management practices, can significantly support the adoption and scaling of agroecology.


Farmers prepare compost, an effective alternative to chemical fertilizers in Kenya. Credit: Manor House Agriculture Center

Prioritizing secure communal tenure and investing in community-led agroecological initiatives presents a more effective and equitable pathway to enhance both productivity and climate resilience than land tenure reforms to expand industrial agriculture. If the Bank was serious about addressing hunger while mitigating climate change, it would immediately shift its support towards scaling agroecology.

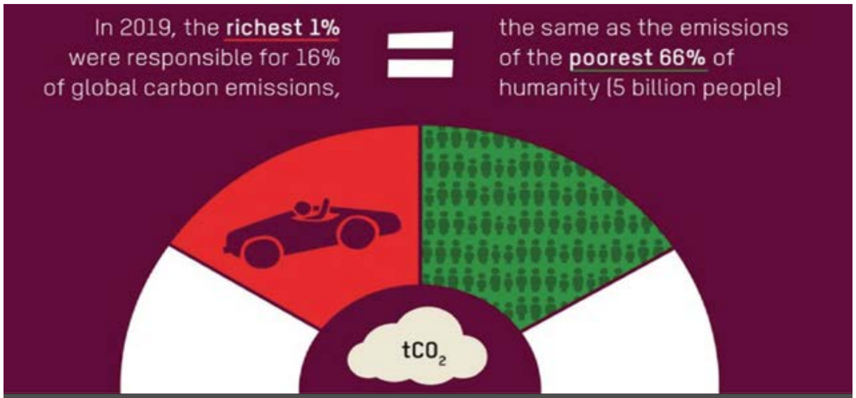
Time to Secure New Sources of Financing to Address the Climate Crisis

Addressing the climate crisis requires a massive increase in funding for adaptation and mitigation. The IPCC has shown that despite the significant mitigation potential of land-based solutions, they have received only US$0.7 billion per year "well short of the more than USD 400 billion" required annually to deliver the mitigation effort.[164] Climate finance from rich countries to poorer ones for mitigation and adaptation should reach around US$1.1 trillion annually, rising to around US$1.8 trillion by 2030. But rich countries have dramatically failed to assume their responsibility, providing only a fraction of what is required.[165] Even more alarming, large portions of this financing are loans that place repayment burdens onto poorer countries, who bear little historic responsibility for climate change.[166]

Amidst this failure, the World Bank has produced a narrative and focused its strategy on making it more attractive and therefore profitable for private capital to come in to fill the gap. As put by one Bank expert, "public funds won't be able to cover the gap alone and there is a need to significantly ramp up private financing for climate adaptation."[167] As detailed in this report, Bank's plans to make more land accessible for climate action caters to the financial and corporate interests who are responsible for the crisis. It also supports their interests by wilfully overlooking important ways that could force the wealthy and the largest corporations to contribute financially to the global response.

People take to the streets for real climate action, San Francisco © The Oakland Institute

Globally, there is plenty of money to go around. According to Oxfam, US$9 trillion could be raised just from increasing taxes on the wealth and income of the top one percent richest people and the profits of 722 of the world's biggest corporations.[168] The EU Tax Observatory has called for a modest two percent annual levy on the wealth of the world's richest individuals as the starting point for a global minimum tax. It estimates that this measure could raise US$250 billion a year from the world's 2,769 billionaires, who were worth US$13 trillion in 2024.[169]



Climate justice requires fair contributions to climate financing. Credit: Oxfam

"A modest two percent annual levy on the wealth of the world's richest individuals could raise US$250 billion a year from the world's 2,769 billionaires, who together were worth US$13 trillion in 2024."

In addition to the above measures, Michel Pimbert, Emeritus Professor of Agroecology and Food Politics at Coventry University, has highlighted other solutions in a recent publication,[170] such as taxing GHG emissions and speculative financial markets, while closing down fiscal paradises and tax havens. According to Pimbert, "the recently proposed Wall Street speculation tax is expected to raise up to US$220 billion in the first year, or more than US$2.4 trillion in revenue over the next decade from wealthy investors." He also calls on debt cancelation and reparation for slavery as means to generate substantial funds for climate action in countries whose peoples were subjected to a long history of slavery, colonial exploitation, and gross violation of human rights.

A global process to negotiate international tax reform is already in motion. In a historic vote in November 2023, 125 countries supported the Africa group's call to launch negotiations on a UN tax convention.[171] As argued by Oxfam, "rich countries need to listen to the demands from the Global South to overhaul the global tax system to make it inclusive and fairer. A UN tax convention could pave the way for reforms to a global tax system that currently favours rich countries."[172]

The chronic underfunding of climate action could be significantly addressed through mechanisms that finance global solidarity and the actions of governments in the Global South. Furthermore, this would constrain the ability of corporations to pursue activities that contribute to more GHG emissions while facilitating the large-scale approaches needed for adaptation to climate change and mitigation.

Protesters at the 2023 Africa Climate Summit said no to Carbon Colonialism. Screenshot from the Real Africa Climate Summit's website

CONCLUSION

This report highlights major concerns with the World Bank's attempts to use the climate crisis as a justification to initiate a global land reform program. Climate experts call for recognizing and securing property rights to stop the overexploitation of the planet and prevent the conversion of more forests, peatlands, and prairies into plantations or pastures. They do not call for private titling, commodifying land and creating land markets. Under the guise of climate action, the Bank is continuing its longstanding push to open lands to corporate exploitation through global initiatives, policy frameworks, and country-level programs.

The Bank's land agenda is about enabling unfettered global economic growth – directly opposing the urgent need to curb the emissions resulting from this growth, as required to keep the increase in global temperature within 1.5° above pre-industrial levels. There is a blatant contradiction between the discourse of securing land for climate action while at the same time working to consolidate land into large farms and making it available for industrial agriculture, which climate experts have widely documented is a devastating model for the climate and biodiversity.

Despite some recent recognition of customary rights and collective land management, the overall goal of the World Bank remains the promotion of private ownership of land and the creation of land markets so that private land can be "put into productive use," leased, sold, and consolidated. Its efforts to promote "sustainable" mining and free up lands for infrastructure primarily serve private corporations at the expense of local communities. This vision for a structural rural transformation across the Global South will trigger widespread dispossession and undermine actual solutions like agroecology.

Children in Papua New Guinea standing up for their land rights © Paul Hilton / Greenpeace

The World Bank's land administration programs cost billions of dollars, mainly provided as loans to governments coerced into reforming their land tenure. At the end of the day, this increases their financial debt, jeopardizing not only the future of those losing their land – the rural population and all the generations to come – but also the population of these countries as a whole. At a critical juncture where climate financing is desperately needed, the Bank is instead driving countries in the Global South further into financial destitution, constraining their ability to mitigate and adapt to the escalating crisis.

As detailed in the following case studies, the warnings in this report are not hypothetical but grounded in real-world, devastating experiences. From Africa to Asia and South America, the World Bank plays a critical role in guiding and financing land programs that ultimately benefit private actors at the expense of millions of people reliant on land for their livelihoods. Together, the cases illustrate the myriad of ways the Bank exerts influence and the broader impact it inflicts.

Absent from this report and from the World Bank's policy documents and programs is the need for land redistribution and restitution to remediate land inequality and past land grabbing that occurred in colonial times or later. On the contrary, as explored in the cases of Malawi, Madagascar, and the Philippines, the Bank actively undermines attempts to address the issue. Addressing inequitable access to land should be a priority for an organization mandated to fight poverty but instead, it remains loyal to its unwavering commitment to private interests, as exemplified in the case of Argentina.

The urgent need to address the climate crisis is undeniable. Efforts by the World Bank to hijack this catastrophe to rebrand and advance its land privatization plans must be fiercely resisted as they will only empower the corporate interests fueling the fire. Fortunately, the solutions to safeguard land rights, increase climate financing, and sustainably feed the world are known. It is time to use them before it is too late.

CASE STUDIES

"Anarcho-Capitalist" Mining Expansion Backed by World Bank in Argentina

In Argentina, the World Bank is playing a key role in helping expand lithium mining on the ancestral lands of Indigenous communities.

Known as "white gold," lithium is a green transition mineral which is used in batteries for electric cars and stabilizing energy grids powered by wind and solar.[173] Over 65 percent of the world's lithium is found in the "lithium triangle," a stretch of the Andes Mountain range and salt flats between Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile.[174] The International Energy Agency forecasts that lithium demand will increase 4,200 percent by 2040[175] and Argentina has the second-largest deposits of the metal in the world. With support from the Bank, Argentina has massively scaled up its mining under its "anarcho-capitalist" President Javier Milei[176] and is now the fastest growing lithium producer in the world.[177]

On July 24, 2023, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private sector arm of the World Bank Group, announced a loan of US$180 million to Allkem, a lithium chemical producer, to support the development of the Sal de Vida lithium extraction operation in Catamarca, Argentina.[178] The IFC's Managing Director, Makhtar Diop, celebrated the investment as a crucial step to "strengthen Argentina's position as one of the world's leading lithium producers and help set high sustainability standards for the lithium mining industry."[179] In December 2024, the IFC signed another agreement with Argentina's largest private electricity company to advance feasibility studies for the first power transmission line to supply renewable energy to mining companies in northwestern Argentina.[180] The US$600 million partnership "seeks to transform the Argentine northwest into a key hub for renewable energy generation and sustainable mining, contributing to the country's economic growth and its competitive positioning on the global stage."[181]

While the Bank has taken a leading role in pushing "sustainable mining" through the CSM Initiative, its direct support to mining threatens Indigenous communities in Argentina. The country's lithium deposits are located in the provinces of Catamarca, Salta, and Jujuy – home to a high concentration of Indigenous Peoples.[182] Despite Argentina's recognition of the right to communal property, the majority of Indigenous communities report legal insecurity to their ancestral territories.[183] Most of their territories are considered "public lands" allowing the government to grant mining concessions on them. Over the past two decades, lithium exploration and mining concessions have been granted on Indigenous lands without the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent of the communities.[184] In light of this, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ordered Argentina in 2020 to immediately adopt all legislative measures necessary to better protect their land rights.[185]

Instead, Argentina further eroded Indigenous land rights to accommodate the boom in lithium mining. In June 2023, the Jujuy local government made sweeping changes to its constitution to allow for "productive use" activities on public lands, as well as the large-scale allocation of water to these projects.[186] The changes additionally restricted the right to protest.[187] The constitutional reform was enacted behind closed doors without consultation of Indigenous communities who decry that the changes will hurt them and increase mining activities.[188] Protests against the constitutional changes were heavily repressed in the following weeks by police, who reportedly assaulted demonstrators and continue to carry out a campaign of intimidation to silence dissent.[189]

Indigenous activists resisting lithium mining in their territories. Credit: Coalition for Human Rights & Development/Susie Maresco

President Milei and Elon Musk celebrate "taking a chainsaw" to vital government programs at the expense of the poor. Source: Government of Argentina

While the World Bank claims that the boom in lithium demand will be a "growth driver," Indigenous communities are resisting these projects given their devastating impact on water resources, the environment, and their livelihoods. Lithium mining demands massive amounts of water and contaminates water sources in surrounding areas and ecosystems.[190] Communities in Argentina have previously suffered from impacts to livestock herding, subsistence agriculture and salt harvesting due to lithium mining while fragile ecosystems in the area have also been damaged.[191] As one community leader explained, "Lithium is like a needle to extract the blood of our mother – and our mother will die. In 50 years, there will be nothing here."[192]

IFC project documents claim that no Indigenous lands will be impacted by the Sal de Vida mine and only limited water impacts are expected over the 40-year project cycle.[193] However, research found that environmental and social risks related to the project are being seriously underestimated by the IFC.[194] According to Ivahanna Larrosa, Regional Coordinator for Latin America at the Coalition for Human Rights in Development, the IFC has "pushed forward a project like Sal de Vida without conducting meaningful consultations and without presenting a cumulative environmental impact assessment, despite the warnings around the destructive impacts for the people and the environment. This is neither green, nor just."[195]

A coalition of 41 civil society organizations wrote to the World Bank in April 2024, warning that mining operations have resulted in environmental impacts in the surrounding area that were ignored in the IFC's environmental assessment.[196] Catamarca, where the IFC mining investment was made, is crucially already over-exploited for lithium – with nine mining projects active or planned in the Salar del Hombre Muerto basin alone.[197] In March 2024, an Argentine court suspended the issuance of new mining permits in the Los Patos River-Salar del Hombre Muerto area – where the IFC funded mine is located – in response to water concerns and inadequate environmental impact assessments for current projects.[198] While a victory for land defenders, the Sal de Vida mine is permitted to continue operations despite the ruling. Ignoring serious pushback from local communities, the IFC continues to enable the exploitation of the rapidly drying basin.[199]

The World Bank has fully endorsed Argentina's lithium expansion. In response to Milei taking a "chainsaw to the state" through deregulation, austerity measures and dismantling agencies that protect rights,[200] the Bank increased support to Argentina.[201] In April 2025, it announced a US$12 billion financing package to accompany a US$20 billion IMF bailout.[202] While poverty in Argentina has spiked under the new regime, top Bank officials continue to publicly praise Milei's actions and the regulatory environment that has spurred the boom in mining projects.[203]

Mining companies are now flocking to Argentina following the new relaxed regulatory environment and promises from Milei to further slash their costs.[204] While only a handful of mines are currently operating, the massive expansion of mines has begun with 38 new mining projects currently planned in the north of the country.[205] In December 2024, Rio Tinto announced plans to invest US$2.5 billion in a new lithium mine.[206]

The Bank is directly enabling the exploitation of Indigenous lands at the expense of local livelihoods and the environment while the government works to transfer more lands into the hands of mining companies. While the Bank pushes initiatives and frameworks with language recognizing the importance of protecting Indigenous land rights in the face of increasing demand for transition minerals, its actions in Argentina expose these endeavors to be nothing more than fake promises.

Madagascar – Example or Cautionary Tale?

The Bank describes Madagascar as "an example for land reform,"[207] but after 20 years of efforts, tangible improvements remain scare, while threats to land rights have only intensified.

Following independence, the country had a hybrid land tenure system with state-owned, titled properties, and also customary land that ensured land access to all communities.[208] For the World Bank, the system was "stagnant and ineffective," hindering investment in agriculture and productivity because "millions of farmers did not have access to official land documents."[209] In 2005, it started guiding and financing a national land reform program. This resulted in a new law, which "replaced the presumption of state ownership with the recognition of 'untitled private property' for the traditional occupants of untitled land," who then became eligible to receive a land certificate.[210] This program was expanded in 2016 through the *Madagascar Agriculture Rural Growth and Land Management Project (CASEF)*, which issued around 570,000 certificates.[211]

For the Bank, this reform was essential to secure land tenure and promote investment.[212] One key justification was that by allowing land to be used as collateral, certificates would provide farmers with access to credit, enabling them to invest in their land. The risk for Malagasy farmers to be legally dispossessed of their land after using it as collateral is significant given the high degree of poverty, the recurrence of extreme weather events, and limited protections from the state.

The goal of the program was also to formalize land tenure after several large-scale agricultural projects had failed or were challenged because of land claims by local communities. Following the much-publicized abandonment of the Daewoo project in 2008, several large-scale land deals faced such challenges. The same year, for example, NewProd, a consortium of foreign and national investors, attempted to buy 20,000 hectares of assumed state-owned land, which was occupied by local communities.[213] In 2012, the state granted 10,000 hectares to Tozzi Green, an Italian agribusiness company, taking away critical grazing land of the Bara community.[214]

Making land more accessible to private interests has thus been a key objective of the Bank. Its 2006 baseline report on land tenure in Madagascar argued that certificates allow "investors to acquire and invest in previously untitled land" and recommended "reducing requirements associated with the granting of leases, significantly reducing restrictions on land areas, reducing transaction costs, and simpler property acquisition processes."[215] Through the *ACP Business-Friendly Program* launched in 2018, the Bank paved the way for easier land acquisition by investors. Notably, it helped draft and pass a new investment law that allowed foreigners to lease land for up to 99 years and created a special legal regime for designated investment zones.[216]

Aligned with the Bank's efforts to attract investors, *The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa's* (COMESA's) *Practical Guide to Doing Business in Madagascar,* claims that out of 35 million hectares suitable for agriculture, "less than ten percent ... is utilised," providing "ample opportunity for expansion."[217] In reality, most of this land is used by people with customary rights for grazing and farming.

After over US$100 million spent on CASEF – including US$53 million in loans the government will have to repay – only about five percent of the population had obtained a certificate as of 2023.[218] As discussed, certificates do not protect farmers' land rights as they face risks of legal dispossession. But even more concerning, land certification has brought up fresh threats on tenure security. In 2021, the Malagasy Parliament passed a law removing the presumption of ownership for individuals occupying untitled land.[219] The law – eventually amended following public outcry – put 80 percent of the Malagasy population at risk of eviction and land grabbing.[220] The risk is thus high that once titles or certificates are awarded, unregistered land will be considered state property and made available to investors.

Pulling the Puppet Strings on Malawian Land Policy

For decades, the World Bank has played a leading role in guiding land policies in Malawi, undermining efforts to address historical inequities in land distribution that persist today to make it one of the world's poorest countries.

Malawi is a small, landlocked nation where 80 percent of the population depends on agriculture for their livelihoods.[221] Access to land for the poor and women remains difficult as a small number of privileged actors – foreign and domestic large-scale farmers – control the most economically valuable lands.[222]


Large plantations supported by the World Bank. Credit: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Stanford Muyila

Following independence in 1964, Malawi implemented a series of unjust land policies that allowed for the conversion of customary land into private land. These laws also entrenched a dual system that prioritized the allocation of land to large estates for the production of tobacco and tea for export over small farmers.[223] By 1989, 14,671 private estates had been carved from customary land, covering over a million hectares while two million smallholders cultivated on an average of less than one hectare each.[224] Instead of working to address this inequity, the Bank diagnosed the high proportion of land that remained under the customary land tenure system as a barrier to development.[225]

Starting in the 1990s, the World Bank and IMF pushed land reform as a condition for debt relief under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Program.[226] They claimed that the "insecurity of customary land tenure and its inability to unleash land markets and spur economic development" necessitated the "registration and titling of customary land rights to promote tenure security."[227] In 2002, a new National Land Policy was passed but implementation stalled in the following years.

In 2016, Malawi finally passed a series of land bills that were guided by the Bank. These included the Customary Land Act (CLA), which enabled the conversion of customary land to privately titled land, known as "customary estates,"[228] allowing it to be used as collateral for a mortgage or leased.[229] This provision was hailed as a necessary step to allow women, historically marginalized, to register portions of customary land in their own name and increase their own tenure security.[230] The CLA also included several strong provisions to further decentralize and democratize control of customary land alongside checks and balances regarding its transfer to outside interests.[231] Full demarcation of customary land, now under traditional land management authorities, was rapidly achieved by 2018, after it was explicitly made a condition by the World Bank for a Development Policy Loan.[232]

The new law, however, does carry risks that could further dispossess small farmers. Before the CLA, buying, selling, and renting land was not explicitly allowed under the customary system.[233] While this was at times circumvented, it remained difficult for outside investors to access customary land. Now that individuals can convert portions of customary land into private titles, they become part of a market-driven system where land is treated as a commodity – leaving them vulnerable to being displaced by corporations and wealthy buyers.[234] As previously noted, the ability to use land as collateral also makes it possible for banks to legally take over the land if farmers experience a difficult harvest year and are unable to pay back their loan or mortgage, which has become all too common amidst Malawi's climatic uncertainties.[235] The Bank has long pushed countries to expand land markets, despite research showing they often solidify existing inequities in access to land.[236]

In 2022, the Bank's true colors were revealed when it stepped in to kill pro-poor amendments proposed by several ministers to address ongoing inequities in land access. The key amendments would have limited agriculture land ownership to 1,000 hectares, constrained foreign ownership, and increased government authority to confiscate undeveloped land.[237] The advocates of these provisions argued they were necessary to support "thousands of landless subsistence farmers fighting for ancestral land they claim was illegally captured by foreign farmers."[238] The Bank, however, took a strong stance against the amendments, labeling them as "obstacles to operating a commercial farm" that would scare away investors.[239] As a result of this pressure, in 2024 Malawi affirmed that foreign nationals can buy or lease land for investment purposes and scrapped the other amendments, in a blow to landless and small farmers.[240]

The Bank's guidance on land policy has been motivated by its ongoing efforts to develop agribusiness in Malawi. The IFC has diagnosed that "gaining access to land and securing uncontestable rights to the use of land are…major challenges for private sector development" and that "addressing inefficient land allocation is … a major opportunity to attract investment."[241] Commercializing agriculture is a key focus of the Bank's funding to Malawi, including the US$95 million *Malawi Agricultural Commercialization Project* and the US$160 million *Shire Valley Transformation Program*, together working to provide the basis for scalable commercial agriculture.[242]

However, efforts to support large-scale commercial farming contradict the Bank's own experts. In 2017, research revealed that large agricultural estates in Malawi were "underachieving compared to smallholders in terms of yield, productivity, and land use intensity."[243] Furthermore, the study found that these estates "also fail to generate positive spillovers for smallholders."[244] Despite these findings, the Bank continues pushing Malawi towards large-scale commercial agriculture instead of supporting proven agroecological solutions that could increase productivity for small farmers in a sustainable way. Malawian farmers who have turned to agroecology have broken free from reliance on expensive chemical fertilizers that wreak havoc on the environment while growing a diverse, year-round supply of nutritious food – demonstrating a viable alternative path that remains largely ignored by the Bank. [245]

The Bank's pervasive influence over Malawian land policy during the past 50 years has stood in the way of truly progressive redistributive efforts needed to address the historical inequities in land distribution. Instead of helping the small farmers and landless it claims to support, the Bank has leveraged massive financial support and loans that are primarily beneficial to agribusiness interests.

Reclaimed monocrop farmland that will be converted into a diverse agroecological system in Malawi. Credit: Permaculture Paradise Institute

Attack on the Land Reform in the Philippines

After decades of progress toward redistributive land reform in the Philippines, the World Bank's SPLIT project is breaking up cooperative farms into individual plots – fueling land loss, corporate takeover, and deepening inequality.

Following the overthrow of dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 by the People's Power Movement, a new constitution asserted "the right of farmers and regular farmworkers, who are landless, to own directly or collectively the lands they till." The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) was launched to address the inequitable land repartition, which had been entrenched in over 300 years of Spanish and US colonial rule.[246] At the time, 10 percent of the people controlled around 90 percent of land.[247] In the following years, many big plantations were transformed into co-operatives, allowing farmers to communally own the land they had worked on for generations.[248] After 12 years, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) had redistributed 5.33 million hectares of land – 53.4 percent of the Philippines' total farmland – to 3.1 million rural poor households.[249]

Denmark Aguitas harvests bananas on the DARBCO co-operative farm in the Philippines © David Bacon

In 2020, the World Bank launched the *Support to Parcelization of Land for Individual Titling (SPLIT)* project, a frontal attack on the collective ownership and management of land by undermining the cooperatives through dividing collectively owned farmland into individual plots.[250] The program, implemented by the DAR, aims to break down around 139,000 collective land ownership certificates into separate titles for individual landholders, impacting around 750,000 coop members.[251] The Bank claims its objectives are to "improve land tenure security...stabilize property rights of agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs)"[252] and increase productivity as individuals are able to access credit by using land as collateral, enabling them to invest in mechanization.[253] SPLIT is funded through a loan of US$370 million, adding to the country's foreign debt of US$139.64 billion.[254]

As previous cooperatives become individual land plots, many farmers are pushed to sell, lease, or pawn land due to poverty or persecution. "Selling of parcelized agrarian lands has been overtly or covertly taking place in many plantations," reports Koronado Apuzen, who helped organize banana coops in Mindanao in the early 1990s and then established the Foundation for Agrarian Reform Cooperatives in Mindanao (FARMCOOP).[255] As SPLIT pushes more land into the realty market, it is likely that corporations and elite families who lost land with the land reform will regain title.[256]

Faced with these critiques, the World Bank maintains that participation in SPLIT is voluntary and "ARBs, wishing to continue to farm their land in a communal manner can opt out of the parcelization process." This, however, is not the case in practice.[257] The program has frequently failed to inform ARBs that the program is optional, giving them insufficient information.[258] Additionally, if any group of coop members want parcelization, the process will move forward even if others oppose it, as the DAR will simply issue an order to enforce it.[259] It has also been documented that soldiers have engaged in house-to-house visits to "persuade" ARBs to abide by the SPLIT project.[260]

While cooperatives are facing challenges that affect their productivity – from the spread of crop-damaging fungi and the pressure to farm sustainably – they receive minimal support from the government.[261] In December 2024, several coops and advocate organizations met with World Bank officials in Taguig City to urge them to drop support for SPLIT. They argued that the coops have been starved of government support, and that scarce resources should strengthen, rather than pull them apart. Resistance against SPLIT continued in February 2025 as four organizations representing 14,000 small farmers, ARBs, Indigenous, and marginalized rural people sent a letter to the World Bank charging that "those who stand to gain long-term from the SPLIT Project are land developers as well as corporate agri-and non-agribusiness conglomerates."[262]

Despite this opposition, SPLIT has been extended through December 2027. The World Bank's motto of "shared prosperity" is defiled by this program that deepens inequality and intends to undo decades of progress made through cooperation and collective land ownership.


Rainforest Destruction for Palm Oil Plantation in Indonesia-ruled Papua © Ulet Ifansasti / Greenpeace

Formalizing Land Tenure Amidst Oil Palm Expansion in Indonesia

In Indonesia, the World Bank struggles with two incompatible goals: Protecting Indigenous land rights while boosting investment and productivity, which will exacerbate deforestation, increase GHG emissions, and land grabbing.

Indonesia is the largest producer of palm oil, accounting for 59 percent of global production in 2024/5.[263] This comes at a steep cost, including land dispossession of Indigenous and rural communities, deforestation, and significant GHG emissions. Yet, President Subianto intends to significantly expand oil palm plantations,[264] with a plan to clear an additional 20 million hectares of forest for industrial food and energy estates.[265] Agrofuel production is a key driver of this expansion, projected to skyrocket in the coming years with a 2023 mandate increasing the required blend of palm oil in diesel.[266]

In recent decades, land conversion for plantations has resulted in massive land dispossession from Indigenous and rural communities. Although a 2013 court ruling mandated the return of ancestral forests to Indigenous communities, only 4.8 million hectares of customary land were recognized as of 2024,[267] leaving over 20 million hectares of Indigenous land without protection from exploitation and conversion by private interests.[268]

The *Program to Accelerate Agrarian Reform* launched by the World Bank in 2018 was supposed to address land conflicts and tenure insecurity. The US$240 million project aimed at systematic land titling in ten provinces and supporting the creation of a land map of the country.[269] The project was supposed to improve land tenure security and reduce conflict over land, but it actually deliberately omitted regions entangled in territorial disputes and forested areas, where many Indigenous communities reside.[270] Civil society, under the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA), rejected its focus on individual tiling and called for an "end to the commodification of land through the individual certification program...and protection for the rights of smallholders, Indigenous Peoples, and landless farmers."[271]

Acknowledging the failures of the project, which left out most Indigenous communities,[272] the Bank initiated a new US$653 million program in December 2024 – the Integrated Land Administration and Spatial Planning (ILASP) – which largely focuses on securing land rights for the most vulnerable communities, including Indigenous Peoples.[273] Its goal is "to strengthen sustainable land use" and to "reduce greenhouse gas emissions linked to land conversion," particularly in forested areas.[274] Shifting the Bank's approach compared with its predecessor, focused on individual titling, this project seems to indicate an important step toward sustainability and equity by supporting the protection of Indigenous territories threatened by oil palm expansion.

However, the Bank's concurrent US$1.5 billion Productive and Sustainable Investment Development Policy Loan to the Indonesian government goes against this goal. The project aims to increase private investment by lowering investment costs through pro-business reforms, reducing barriers to foreign investment, and encouraging private investment in renewable energy.[275] Given the Bank considers biofuels (specifically palm-based biodiesel) as a "green investment,"[276] this funding may therefore contribute to the government's plans to massively expand oil palm operations for biodiesel production.

This new project threatens the livelihoods of Indigenous communities while contributing to more land conversion. The Bank's Climate and Development Report for Indonesia acknowledges the risks of deforestation and higher emissions and emphasizes the importance of making palm-based biodiesel "sustainable."[277] However, mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of oil palm plantations in Indonesia have a long history of stringent failure.[278] The government-led Indonesia Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) scheme has permitted the deforestation of an area larger than California and left large portions of Indigenous land unprotected.[279] Similarly, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which also certifies plantations in Indonesia, has been accused of overlooking human rights violations and failing to enforce its own standards.[280] Nearly 50 percent of RSPO-certified oil palm land was deforested within the last 40 years.[281]

The Bank acknowledges that the loan's objectives to "improve investment climate and competitiveness" could be problematic if there is "insufficient government capacity to determine the appropriate environmental risk."[282] This risk is high given the government's current push to expand palm oil, and President Subianto's dismissal of the environmental concerns – arguing that plantations can replace forests.[283] This case is a good illustration of the tensions and contradictions faced by the Bank, when attempting to secure land tenure while continuing to promote pro-business policies for economic growth, which irrevocably will threaten land rights.

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