

# The Ignorance of Water Grabbing – Why Water should matter more than Land

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## Executive Summary

*This policy brief discusses the relationship between water and land grabbing. It argues that the International Land Coalition's (ILC) 10 commitments to achieve land governance fail to prevent or revert the grabbing of water. It also critiques the ILC and the Global Land Forum 2018 (GLF) for overlooking the issue of water grabbing during discussions about land grabbing. The policy brief starts by defining water and land grabbing and subsequently outlines the importance of water, and the interconnectedness of land and water grabbing. It then emphasises the needs for addressing land and water grabbing in unison and identifies specific policy goals to guide the way forward.*

## Introduction

Searching the terms “water” and “water grabbing” in the [International Land Coalitions' "Our Commitments"](#) PDF file, you find that “water” is mentioned solely three times: Twice about water advocacy or management organisation and once, in the case of large-scale initiatives addressing several aspects including water. The ILC network of over 200 civil society and intergovernmental organisations have defined those 10 commitments to guide and express their common vision: Land governance centred on the people to ensure the rights and protection of women, men, and communities living on and from the land and to make them the ultimate decision-makers on how their land and resources are used. Moreover, while they

attempt to protect the accountability, transparency, and the rights of those people, as well as to promote the inclusion of indigenous people, women, and minorities, those commitments fail to address the rising issue of “water grabbing”.

### **Defining Land & Water Grabbing**

The Transnational Institute’s study [“The Global Water Grab”](#) defines water grabbing or “water hoarding” as a “...situation in which powerful actors, public or private, are able to take control of or reallocate precious water resources for their own benefit, at the expense of local communities and ecosystems on which the communities livelihoods are based”. However, finding one single definition for it has been proven difficult because additional and distinct sets of issues which are linked to the materiality of water become prevalent: Water’s availability flocculates across time and space, flows within boundaries, and has shifting amounts of availability depending on factors such as rainfall. For instance, there have been cases when international

investors purchased lands of rivers and water springs in [Indonesia, the Philippines, or Chile](#) – meaning that they own the land area beneath the water but not directly the water. This allows those who purchased the land to control the stream of water by dams or changes in the environmental landscape. Therefore, water grabbing is much more diverse in its appearance than its prominent counterpart “land grabbing”.

Land grabbing is defined as “...land acquisitions that are in violation of human rights, without prior consent or the pre-existing land users, and with no consideration of the social and environmental impacts” by the [2011 Tirana conference of the ILC](#). It is often characterised by large-scale investments for rural developments which offer minimal benefit to the people living there. Grabbing land has become a new, international “gold rush” – [often coined as a new form of colonialism](#). Also, evidence from recent years reveals that various actors reaching from governments to massive national and international companies to the financial sector grab

land abroad. This is especially the case in developing countries where countries are more willing to sell their property to increase foreign investment. Moreover, while agriculture, energy, and food surely have motivated the global land grab, water has become one of the most important, yet insufficiently investigated, reasons to seize land.

### **Why Water Matters**

Planet Earth is covered by [1,390 million cubic kilometres of water](#). Saltwater in our seas and oceans accounts for [97.5%](#) and solely [2.5%](#) is fresh water – most of which is frozen under a thick ice cap in the polar sea. Humanity only has access to circa [0.5% of fresh water](#) (93,000 cubic kilometres), and only a small proportion of that [0.5 % is uncontaminated and drinkable](#). Meanwhile, consumption of water has increased drastically due to an increasing population: The global level water availability per capita has declined from [9,000 cubic meters in the 1990s to 7,800 in the first ten years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century](#). [By 2025, this is most likely going to stagnate to 5,000 cubic meters](#).

Academics have therefore coined the term [“water wars”](#) several times – defined as “wars of conflicts fought over water or the lack of it” – and predict the extreme likelihood of such events in the future. Water should be in the plenty. Yet, the right and access to water is often off limit due to political or commercial reasons causing water, an accessible common good, to become a private good which must be negotiated and paid for; meaning that a freely available natural resource was converted into a financial asset which can now be [exchanged on major global equity markets](#). Consequently, [powerful actors gain and maintain the access to water resources](#) which involve legal but illegitimate forces – causing dispossession, destruction, environmental, and human rights abuse often impacting already poor and marginalised populations.

### **The Interconnectedness of Water Grabbing**

The global scale of water grabbing is complex and invisible. First, there are various types of water such as surface and groundwater or [“blue” and “green water”](#)

– referring to rain and fresh water. Second, water systems span on land through an array of different ecological contexts such as rivers, freshwater lakes, or wetlands.

[“Land and water grabbing are deeply intertwined”](#). While water was not featured prominently in early literature on land grabbing, the dimension of water is [increasingly highlighted](#) because it is impossible to grab land without grabbing water and vice versa.

Land grabbing has been primarily focusing on the grabbed land, rather than on one of the essential reasons for grabbing: water. Growing evidence continuously shows that [land grabs are motivated by seizing water resources](#) because of the increasing problem of water scarcity: A lack of water impacts food production, climate change, privatization of water, the competition of irrigatable land, and detrimental changes in the quality and amount of available water have been increasing.

Water is a target and a driver for the land grabbing phenomenon. The interconnectedness can be seen by agricultural land grabs which cover large dimensions of food, fuel, and raw material for an industry which put water as a top priority. For instance, [in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), rainfall is too scarce for high investment in agricultural production without securing access to reliable water. Water and land are interconnected because water determines which land is potentially most irrigatable and therefore, most profitable. Thus, land grabbing has become about freshwater resources to produce food commodities (except fish) which require both, land and water – directly or indirectly. In fact, [water sustains 40% of the world’s food production](#), and fundamentally, the driver of the global land grab has been for the need for water rather than for the land itself. For this reason, water grabbing should always be included in the definition of land grabbing.

## **Inadequate Global Governance of Water Grabbing**

The growing concerns over land and water grabbing have triggered numerous governance responses to tackle water grabbing. However, those governance frameworks and responses are insufficient to stop and rollback water grabbing.

First, natural resources [lack a holistic and integrated approach](#). Despite the interconnectedness between water and land management systems, both have been developed in isolation from one another; which can be seen by the ILC's approach which has incorporated water into the general action against land grabbing. The [ILC's 2011 Tirana Declaration](#) "...denounce[s] all forms of land grabbing, whether international or national" and promises transparent and accessible land-related information, and that the ILC will monitor trends in land governance to promote "...accountability, informed dialogue and policy change". The declaration mentions that there is a current "intensified and increasingly unequal competition for land, water,

forests, rangelands, biodiversity, and other natural resources". Yet, this preamble remains the only clause mentioning "water" in any form throughout the declaration. Accordingly, the concept of water grabbing is not used officially in any policy fora nor unofficially by international development organisations.

Second, debates, processes, and policies on water governance have mainly been shaped and developed by global entities such as the [International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage \(ICID\)](#) which have increased their cooperate seizure and have largely promoted water privatisation and water as an economic good. For instance, close to the GLF, protestors gathered to peacefully stand for just and genuine agrarian reform. They also criticised the forum and the ILC for having strong connections to the World Bank which donates money to regional development banks and large donor organisations where [development aid is frequently linked to water resource privatisation](#).

Third, the framework which surpassingly defends water as a public good and advances the connection between human rights and water governance has been having [limited impact on rolling back water governance](#) till now. While the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) published a report on [“Water as Human Right?”](#) in 2004 - raising for the first time in history the question of whether or not water should be a human right - the current debates and approaches fall short in several key aspects; which can be seen at the ILC’s plenaries and breakout sessions where the topic of water grabbing has not been mentioned. One session focused on how to prevent, avoid, and revert land grabbing through several tools which could be applied before or after the land grab has occurred. While the tools were in some ways practical and focused on rural communities, the discussion included water as part of the land instead of acknowledging the importance of separating water from the debate. What I am trying to emphasise is that all resources on the grabbed land would not exist, work, or be valuable without water

– how else would a family aggregate their farm, feed their farm animals, plant trees, or have wood for making fire?

Finally, the [focus has been mainly on the domestic use of water](#) instead of productive applications such as mining, energy, hydropower, or other capital-intensive activities. Such aspects have been ignored and require to be put back on the list of discussion. According to an ILC Member from Laos, a country where hydropower and therefore, the supply of water and energy depends mainly on foreign, Chinese companies, Laos and its people become highly dependent on China for their water resources – making it sensitive for water conflicts and water grabbing. Accordingly, such cases also emphasise the point that water is a locally and globally pluri-legal category: Water grabbing takes place locally and internationally, and while countries have achieved to implement some policies to protect water and land grabs, management of water and land have been kept separated from one another.

## Policy Recommendations & Potentials

Water scarcity is a global threat. There are approximately [700 million people](#) in 43 countries which live below the water-stress threshold of 1,700 cubic metres per person – prompting talk about a “global water crisis”. Accompanied by climate change, global warming, and an increased risk of droughts, water users must seek to manage their water resources more sustainably. Here are some recommendations:

On the supply-side, countries need to invest and expand their supply of water resources by ameliorating water storage facilities while shifting to non-conventional sources such as sea to fresh water transformation. Those options are often expensive and not always economically viable.

On the demand-side, efforts must be focused on [“...water recycling, conservation and the reduction of water waste...”](#). This can be achieved by implementing policies focusing on environmental protection and energy

savings given that in some countries such as [China, 97% of its energy production require water](#). Major land investors should be encouraged to take a lead on effort to recycle, conserve and reduce water use.

Land and thereby water grabbing data has been inherently inaccurate and incomplete due to the rapid development of the phenomenon, lack of transparency, and the absence of standard criteria to classify and report water grabs. It is therefore time for the ILC, its network, and committed activists and NGOs to ameliorate the collection of data and establish standard criteria on water grabbing.

Further, after having established the ten commitments on land governance, it is time for diversifying the definition of land grabbing to find specific policy goals, liabilities, and actions countering the grabbing of water. In other words, there is a need to move away from single-issue approaches to more holistic policies which

highlight the connections between land, water and other common goods.

The contestation and appropriation of water is nothing new, but the contemporary context of converging international dynamics surrounding food security, climate change, minorities, human rights, and land grab make a focus on water grab all the more important. Bring water into the debate offers the potential to cast new light onto the global land grab phenomenon, as well as other global development challenges. Given the ILC's global platform, the coalition has the opportunity to guide discussions on the use and management of water moving forward and to better develop our understanding of the interconnectedness between land grab and water grab.

### **The ILC, Water Grabbing, & Future Fears**

The GLF had promising plenaries, breakout sessions, and talk shows where water grabbing could have been included. Yet, there was almost no discussion on this topic – except the talks I had outside of the plenary and breakout sessions.

Even within the sessions addressing land grabbing, water was pushed to the sidelines instead of being treated as a major issue in its own right. While the ILC's 10 commitments help in tackling the global land grab, it is time to specify policies and international frameworks to address water grabbing within the context of land grabbing as well. The topic is urgent: Water has become scarce, privatised, traded, and restricted. Therefore, there is a need to expand advocacy against the hoarding and grabbing of water.

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