

# Code of conduct needed to protect small-scale farmers from “land grabs”

The purchase of large areas of land overseas by foreign countries and companies, the so-called “land grabs”, have led to a call for a code of conduct. Will such a code help protect small-scale farmers’ rights to land and food? Ruth Meinzen-Dick from IFPRI, the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington, thinks it will. But for it to be effective, it

**will have to meet certain requirements.**

“Land grabbing” has received a lot of attention in the media over the past few months. One of the first to report on the topic was Ruth Meinzen-Dick, senior-researcher at IFPRI. Together with Joachim von Braun, she published a paper in April that listed overseas land investments, and that identified opportunities and threats. One of the threats they mentioned is the unequal bargaining power of small-scale farmers, who are at risk of being displaced from their land.

How can a code of conduct stave off such a risk? As Ruth Meinzen-Dick points out, small-scale farmers cannot effectively negotiate terms when dealing with such powerful institutions like governments and large corporations. “They need to know their rights. Therefore, existing local landholders must be informed and involved in negotiations over land deals. Secretive deals only lead to insecurity. A code of conduct can help ensure this. But for it to work, it needs to be translated into regulations binding within a country. Those who do not adhere, can then get sanctioned in the international arena.”

### What more does it take?

Countries buying land have to see that such a code is in their interest, says Meinzen-Dick. “If it is only the countries that have land to sell or lease that are in favour of a code, it will not work. Investors can then always look for a country without such regulations and strike a special deal.”



A map from the IFPRI report “Land grabbing’ by foreign investors in developing countries”.

How likely is it, though, that investing countries will support such a code? Very likely, says Ruth Meinzen-Dick. “I participated in a forum on land grabbing where there were two people from the investors’ side as well. They said it is in their interest to engage in fair trade. Because if local people feel their land is taken from them, there will be problems and investments are not going to yield returns. If investors have an eye for the needs of local people, it will reduce the risk of investment. Companies like Unilever have looked into buying produce from smallholders. We should get them together so they can share experiences and get comfortable with smallholder farming.”

### Developments

At last July’s G8 meeting of rich countries, participants pledged to take further steps in arriving at a code of conduct. Was Meinzen-Dick disappointed to see that the pledge did not extend beyond a proposal for principles and best practices on land purchasing in developing countries? “It would have been nice to see more. But I was pleased to see the issue actually got raised. I just hope that that is not the end of it.”

A code of conduct is not likely to fall off the agenda. The African Union might be the first to come up with something concrete, as it is working on a Framework and Guidelines for Land Policies in Africa, together with the UN Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank. This is assuring because, as Meinzen-Dick says: “Issues are most pressing in Africa. Communal land tenure is particularly prevalent there.” Perhaps the African Union can jumpstart the process. (PR)

### Further reading

IFPRI ([www.ifpri.org](http://www.ifpri.org)) invites people to share information on land deals on <http://ifpriblog.org>. The International Land Coalition ([www.landcoalition.org](http://www.landcoalition.org)) came out with a discussion paper last July, called “Increasing commercial pressure on land: Building a coordinated response”. It gives an overview of publications on land grabbing, including the report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, and a report on land deals in Africa by IIED, FAO and IFAD (see New Books, page 41). It also gives an overview of what elements a code of conduct could contain. Grain has relaunched the website [www.farmlandgrab.org](http://www.farmlandgrab.org), devoted specifically to the topic. It keeps track of all the news, and lists over 180 reports of land-related investments for food production.