

3-31-2017

# Extreme Land Concentration Fuels Poverty, Conflict in Latin America

Andrés Gaudín

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

---

## Recommended Citation

Gaudín, Andrés. "Extreme Land Concentration Fuels Poverty, Conflict in Latin America." (2017).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14506>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## Extreme Land Concentration Fuels Poverty, Conflict in Latin America

by *Andrés Gaudín*

Category/Department: Region

Published: 2017-03-31

A study by the international charitable organization Oxfam suggests that more than half of the productive land in Latin America is held by just 1% of the largest farms, while small-scale producers, who together account for approximately 80% of agricultural operations, occupy only 13% of the available land.

UN organizations consider Latin America to be the world's most unequal region in terms of income distribution. The same goes for land distribution, according to the Oxfam report. Titled "Unearthed: Land, Power and Inequality in Latin America" and released in November 2016, the study draws on data from the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to argue that the imbalance in land access and control is a primary cause of the region's high poverty levels. Some 167 million people in Latin America have subsistence-level incomes, and another 71 million are destitute.

Oxfam describes the situation in Latin America as being "rooted in a culture closer to feudalism than a modern democracy," and says that campesinos (agrarian workers) and indigenous people are particularly vulnerable, as they are often pushed off their land by large economic groups.

The driving force behind the region's unequal land distribution, according to the study, is the rapid expansion of extractivism, a production model based on the exploitation of natural resources such as minerals, hydrocarbons, large-scale livestock production, and monoculture plantations to grow things like soybeans and oil palms, primarily for export. Other organizations link the unprecedented land accumulation by powerful economic groups to the unbridled demand for biofuels.

In a subsection titled "The Geopolitics of Soybeans," the Oxfam report says the governments in some Latin American countries have imposed "a model of territorial organization tailored to the needs of transnational corporations." As a result, huge swaths of land are dedicated to the production of just a single crop: soybeans.

Using 2014 numbers, the report says production is most concentrated in Paraguay, where soybeans cover 68% of all available farmland. Other major producers include Argentina, which uses 49% of its arable land for soybeans, Uruguay (45%), Brazil (37%), and Bolivia (30%). Together, the five countries produce more than half the world's soybeans and form what the Swiss multinational Syngenta insultingly dubbed—more than a decade ago, and much to the chagrin of the countries involved—the "United Republic of Soybeans."

### *Rush for raw materials*

The report also looks at land distribution on a country-by-country basis. In the case of Peru, Oxfam argues that land concentration and the precarious legal situation facing communities that lack proper land titles combine to threaten the livelihoods of thousands of families, deepening levels of poverty and inequality as a result. In recent years, much of Peru's coastal lands have been turned

over to export-oriented agricultural productions. The same goes for the country's jungle region, where large swaths of land are being used to produce palm oil.

Vladimir Pinto, a land rights expert with Oxfam in Peru, said at the time of the report's release that to properly tackle inequality, it's necessary "to deal with the abysmal differences in the distribution of and legal access to land, since they fuel social and environmental conflict." There are no clear policies in place or institutional backing, he said, for indigenous and campesino families who are struggling to legalize ownership of their landholdings and are being forced off their parcels. Pinto cited the example of Nuevo Andoas, near the border with Ecuador, where the process of recognizing land titles for 14 indigenous communities was sidelined because the government of then-president Ollanta Humala (2011-2016) gave priority to a hydrocarbons project.

In Brazil, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party)—a left-wing party with labor-movement origins that governed from 2002 until the ousting of Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) last August—gradually turned its back on its founding principles to the point where it stopped talking about land distribution altogether ([NotiSur, Sept. 30, 2016](#)). Pressure continues to come, however, from organizations like the Catholic Church's Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission, CPT), Caritas Internationalis, La Via Campesina, traditional Protestant churches, and newer Presbyterian and Pentecostal groups.

In a 2015 document, the CPT argued that "Brazil is in the process of going back to 'primarization,' meaning a return to an economy based on the production and export of agricultural and non-agricultural (mining) commodities, an economy unable to finance or foment sustainable development and satisfy the needs of society."

### *Ill-gotten lands*

In Paraguay, numerous campesino leaders fighting for land rights and opposing clear-cutting and the indiscriminate use of glyphosate and other toxic agrochemicals have been killed ([NotiSur, May 20, 2016](#), and [July 1, 2016](#)). Between July 2013 and July 2016, 43 rural communities demanding land ownership or opposing aerial fumigations suffered violence at the hands of the state.

The roots of Paraguay's unequal distribution of land date back to the country's founding. But the situation was accentuated in the second half of the 20th century, when the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) implemented various government-land distribution programs that benefited military personnel, major business owners, and leaders in the governing Partido Colorado. Oxfam cites information from Paraguay's Truth and Justice Commission to note that as of 2003—14 years after the Stroessner regime ended—more than 64% of the land given away by the state during the previous half-century of agrarian reform had been irregularly allocated during the dictatorship.

To understand the magnitude of the situation, it's worth noting that the ill-gotten lands represent 32.7% of the country's total arable land and 19.3% of the national territory. Oxfam updated its own numbers, compiled in 2014, to conclude that approximately 2% of the Paraguayan population now controls 85% of all arable land, meaning the other 98% of the population has to make do with just 15% of the available cropland.

Like in Argentina, Bolivia, southern Brazil, and Uruguay, the best Paraguayan lands are used for the cultivation of soybeans, a variety of plant that can be grown just about anywhere ([NotiSur](#),

May 27, 2016). Demand for soybeans, furthermore, has begun to drop in China, the world's biggest consumer, where the oilseed is used among other things to feed pigs.

### *Expanding corporate control*

In Colombia, as part of the peace deal reached with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FARC) guerrillas, the government began a timid process of land distribution that, in reality, amounts to little more than returning plots that campesinos had been forced—by drug cartels and paramilitary organizations—to sell at miserable prices.

In Venezuela, when the late Hugo Chávez (1999- 2013) was at the height of his power, the government expropriated some 3.6 million hectares of unoccupied or idle farmland. The country, various reports agree, has approximately 17 million ha suitable for livestock farming and milk production, but of that, only 800,000 ha are controlled by the state. For the expropriated plots, top-grade beef cattle and milk cows were imported from Argentina and Uruguay, the South American leaders in this area.

In Uruguay, surging soy prices starting in 2002 sparked a land rush by foreign buyers to the point that 27 business conglomerates now own more than 1.64 million ha, or 10% of the country's arable land. That's nearly equivalent to the total land holdings (1.69 million ha) of the more than 20,000 Uruguayans formally registered as family farmers (as of 2013), a report by the state-run Universidad de la República noted. Uruguay is the only country in South America, furthermore, to deal with the issue of "land grabbing" by foreign states, as is the case with 450,000 ha acquired in the past decade by a pair of wood pulp producers, both with financial ties to the Finnish government.

Without naming any country in particular, the Oxfam study argues that in Latin America, extractivism is favored by both conservative and progressive governments. Examples include the governments of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011) in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and Juan Manuel Santos in Colombia. The pro-extraction policies of Uribe and Santos, his successor, are particularly noteworthy. In 2002, at the start of Uribe's first term as president, mining companies had roughly 1 million ha of concessions in Colombia. By 2015, that number had risen nearly six-fold, to 5.7 million ha.

Extractivism, the Oxfam report argues, doesn't just expand corporate control over large swaths of the national territory; it also increases the influence those players have over public policy—in all countries, without exception ([NotiSur, May 29, 2015](#)). Competition for control over natural resources, furthermore, has sparked territorial conflicts between large companies and local communities, and led to increased levels of violence against people who try to defend the water and forests, or stand up for the rights of indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesino communities that have been marginalized, attacked, and criminalized.

-- End --